Toradora! Volume1

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Color Illustrations

These are color illustrations that were included in volume 1

竹宮ゆゆこ
イラスト◎ヤス

とらドラ！

た-20-3

とらドラ！

竹宮ゆゆこ

電撃文庫
¥510

とらドラ！

桜舞う四月。高校二年。新しいクラス。
目つきは悪いが普通の子、高須竜児は、ちっちゃいのに凶暴獰猛、“手乗りタイガー”と恐れられる逢坂大河と出会う。そして彼女の知ってはいけない秘密を知ってしまい——。それが竜虎相食む恋と戦いの幕開けだった！
いつもにこにこ、超マイペース娘の櫛枝実乃梨、文武両道、勤勉実直、だけどちょっとずれてるメガネ委員長、北村祐作も絡み、どこか変なメンツによる恋はすんなりいくはずもなく……!?
『わたしたちの田村くん』の竹宮ゆゆこ&ヤスが贈る超弩級ラブコメ登場！

電撃文庫

た-20-3

とらドラ!

竹宮ゆゆこ

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竹宮ゆゆこ（たけみや）

2月24日生まれ、東京在住。居間の蛍光灯が切れたまま一ヶ月ぐらい暗がりの中で生活していました。先日ようやく付け替えたのですが、外したまま放置してある切れた蛍光灯には蛍光塗料が塗ってあるらしく、夜中にぼんやり光って鬱陶しいです。未練がましい奴だ。

【電撃文庫作品】

わたしたちの田村くん
わたしたちの田村くん2
とらドラ!

イラスト：ヤス

1984年8月3日生。O型。徳島県生まれで千葉県在住。アパートの近くに道路があって時々車が通るのですが、そのたびにアパートが微妙に揺れます。引っ越したい……。

カバー／暁印刷

Q

あなたにとって、

手乗りタイガーってなんですか？

とらドラ！

竹宮ゆゆこ　イラスト◎ヤス

高須竜児
きれい好き＆料理も得意、どこに嫁に出しても恥ずかしくない高校二年生。目つきの悪さは単なる遺伝。いまだ眠れる竜……なのか？

櫛枝実乃梨

いつもにこにこ超マイペース、変幻自在の言動で周囲をほんわか翻弄するソフトボール部女子部長。その天然は"手乗りタイガー"をも御すという。

北村祐作

生徒会副会長にしてソフトボール部の男子部長。文武両道、勤勉実直、硬軟自在の優れ者。どこかずれたところもあるが、女子にとってはそこがいいとか。

高須泰子

真の名は魅羅乃、永遠の二十三歳。二人暮しの高須家では深刻な竜児依存症だが、戦場（店ともいう）では華々しい活躍をしている……かもしれない。

とらドラ！

竹宮ゆゆこ

イラスト◎ヤス

“手乗りタイガー”逢坂大河
「……結局誰も私のこと、わかってなんかいないじゃない」
これは、そんな“手乗りタイガー”をめぐる
恋と団欒のものがたり――
デザイン◎荻窪裕司

There is something in this world which no one has ever seen.

It is soft and sweet.

If it is spotted, I'm sure everyone will want to have it,'

Which is why no one has ever seen it.

For this world has hidden it quite well, so that it is difficult to obtain.

But, there will come a day when it is discovered by somebody,

And only those who should obtain it will be able to find it.

That is all.

Chapter 1

"Damn it!"

Seven-thirty in the morning. It was a fine day, and dim inside the house. The house was a double-room plus kitchen apartment facing south in a two-story townhouse , about a ten minute walk from the railway station. Rent was around 80,000 yen.

"I give up! I just can't get this right!"

A frustrated hand wiped the mist from the mirror. The run-down bathroom was foggy due to an early morning shower. So after wiping the mirror, it returned to being cloudy. It was pointless to take anger out on the mirror no matter how frustrated one was...

"This stuff is nothing but a rip-off!"

Make yourself gentle with floating bangs — That slogan was seen in the latest men's fashion magazine. Takasu Ryūji's bangs were now "floating". As the article instructed, he pulled his bangs at length, blow-dried them until they stood up, and then gently rubbed them

sideways with some hair gel. He specifically woke up a half-hour early in order to make his hair resemble that of the model's and have his wish granted.

Nonetheless, "Maybe I was too naïve in trying to change myself just with my bangs."

Ryūji dejectedly threw the trendy magazine, which had taken him a lot of courage to buy, into the garbage bin. Unfortunately, his poor aim meant it completely missed, opened itself up as it landed, and scattered all the trash out of the bin. The open page read "You can still make it in time for the start of school. Gentle or wild? Our journey towards modeling."

Were it up to me, I'm not too sure if I would care about modeling. Still, I wanted to change.

But I failed.

Feeling defeated, Ryūji wet his hands with water and messed up his hair which he had spent so much time making up. He reverted to his usual randomly straight hair. He then knelt down to pick up the trash that was all over the ground.

"Ah!? What's this...m...mold...it's moldy!"

Even though he had always wiped the steam off, even after spending a whole day last week cleaning out the mold in the kitchen and bathroom... All his effort had gone to waste in that horribly humid room. Biting his lips begrudgingly, Ryūji tried to see if he could wipe off the mold with some tissues. Of course, it was never going to be that easy, and he ended up tearing the tissues to shreds.

"Damn, I just used them all up a while ago. I'm going to have to buy some mold removers again." *For now I'll have to leave them aside, but I'll definitely come back and destroy you guys!* Ryūji glanced downwards at the moldy patch while picking up the trash. He then gave the ground a rough wipe with some paper towels, clearing up any loose hair and dust and wiping off the steam on the washing basin before lifting his head up and sighing.

"Oh yeah, pet food. Hey, In~ko-chan!"

"Ah..."

A high-pitched voice responded to the high-school student's ferocious shout.

Good, he's awake. Getting himself together again, Ryūji went barefoot into the wooden-tiled kitchen, took some prepared pet food and spare newspapers, and headed towards the corner of the tatami-laid living room. Removing the cloth over the birdcage there, Ryūji greeted his cute pet which he had not seen all night.

Now, other people may raise their pets differently, but this was how the Takasus raised their pet parrot. Because he looked rather horrible when he slept, every morning before he woke up, he had to be covered with a cloth.

"Good morning, Inko-chan."

A yellow parrot, that was Inko-chan. As usual, Ryūji added some pet food while talking to him.

"G, good...morning," his eyes blinked upwards in a rather unpleasant and enigmatic way, though he still managed to reply in Japanese. Though he had just woken up, it looked like he was in quite a good mood. This was why he was cute.

"Inko-chan, try saying *let's eat*."

"L, let's, e...let's eat! Let's eat! Let's! Eat!"

"Okay, enough. Now let's see if you can say *that*! Try and see if you can say your name...come on, say *Inko-chan*."

"I, I, In, I, In, Iiii...I..." Inko-chan seemed to be using a lot of energy, as he shook his head and rapidly puffed up his body, and then flapped his wings quickly. "......iiiii....."

His eyes squinting, one could vaguely see the gray tongue that stuck out of his beak. *Maybe he can do it today,* thought his master as he gripped his fists. In the end...

"Blegh!"

Argh... Why are birds so dumb? As expected when you have a brain that only weighs a gram, Ryūji sighed, wrapping up the soiled newspaper. He threw the newspaper into a plastic bag. As he was about to put it together with the other trash in the kitchen,

"...Where...are...you...going..."

The idiot lying behind the fusuma seemed to have woken up as well.

"Ryū-chan, is that your uniform you're wearing? Why? " she asked wearily.

Ryūji elegantly wrapped up the trash bag and replied to the voice, "I'm going to school. Didn't I already tell you yesterday that school starts today?"

"...Ah."

Opening her legs on top of the futon, she repeatedly muttered the following as though she was about to cry, *Then, then...*

"Then, what about Ya-chan's...lunch? I haven't smelled any food...didn't you make some for me?"

"Nope."

"Ehhh~... Then...what's Ya-chan gonna do...when she wakes up...? There's nothing good to eat..."

"I'll be home by the time you wake up! I'm just going to the Term Opening Ceremony."

"Wha...is that it..."

Hee hee hee hee, she smiled as she closed her open legs together and began to clap her hands ...Sorry, clap her feet.

"Opening Ceremony, huh? 'Grats~! That means, Ryū-chan is gonna be a second year from today on?"

"Let's set that aside. Didn't I already tell you before that, no matter how busy you are, you must always remove your makeup before you sleep? Since you moaned about how bothersome it was before, didn't I specifically buy some special makeup removing tissues," Ryūji inspected her surroundings a bit better, "...Ah...AH! You've gotten makeup powder all over the pillow! I can't wash that off! You should take better care of your skin; you aren't young anymore!"

"Sorry."

Her leopard-spotted panties were completely exposed. As she got up, her large breasts shook while some of her messy blond hair got stuck in her cleavage. Whether it was the waving of her hair or the long nails from her fingers, she gave off a very feminine feel. But still, "

Must've drunk too much, I just came back an hour ago. Ah~ So sleepy," she yawned, "Oh yeah...I brought some pudding home."

As she exhaled and rubbed her thick eyelashes, she slowly wandered towards the convenience store bag at the corner of the room. That appearance — her cherry lips muttering "pudding", her plump cheeks, and her round eyes — such child-like features just did not seem to fit her. Though she was a bit weird, perhaps she could still be called a pretty lady.

"Huh...Ryū-chan, I can't find the spoon."

"Maybe the store assistant forgot to put it in?"

"Can't be! I saw him put it inside. That's strange..."

This was Takasu Ryūji's mother Takasu Yasuko: stage name "Mirano". Thirty-three years old (she always claimed to be forever 23), she worked as a hostess in the town's only bar "Bishamonten Kuni".

Yasuko poured the contents of the convenience store bag out and rummaged through them at the corner of her

futon. Her little face frowned, "It's so dark in here...I can't find the spoon like this! Ryū-chan, can you open the curtains?"

"They are open."

"Eh~...? Ahh, that's right...since I don't always wake up at this time, I must've forgotten..." Inside a dark room, the rather odd mother-son couple sighed together.

It was the window facing south.

It had been six years since they moved in here. Inside this little house where the two of them lived, their entire source of natural light came from the south side window. As the entrance was on the north and because they were surrounded on the east and west sides by their neighbors ' houses, only the south side had windows. Despite this, sunlight had been abundant, especially during the mornings. There was no need to turn on the lights from sunrise to sunset, unless it was raining. The bright sunlight used to always shine plentifully on Ryūji while in his uniform preparing breakfast for the two of them and on Yasuko who would be sleeping soundly.

However, all that came to an end last year.

"Damn that apartment building."

"Just what kind of people live there anyway? And turn on the lights already!"

Last year, just a few meters from the south side of this house, a ten-story luxury apartment building was built. As a result, the sun no longer shone through. This had driven Ryūji to the brink of madness and frustration countless times already — the laundry could no longer dry; the tatami now expanded due to the humidity, curled at the corners and grew moldy; and sometimes the windows would even get terrible condensation. The wallpaper was starting to peel, which must have had something to do with the humidity as well. *It doesn't matter since this is just a rented apartment*, Ryūji wanted to tell himself. Yet being extremely sensitive about keeping a place tidy and clean, Ryūji just could not get himself to tolerate and compromise on such a thing. Looking up towards the white-tiled high-class condo, there was nothing those two poor people could do but stand shoulder to shoulder with their mouths open.

"Hmm, it doesn't affect me much, since Ya-chan sleeps in the morning anyway!"

"There's no use complaining. Besides, the rent's gone down by 5,000 yen as a result."

Taking out a spoon from the kitchen and handing it to Yasuko, Ryūji scratched his head and said, "Well, I'll be going." This wasn't the time for family bonding; it was about time to leave.

Wearing his gakuran jacket, Ryūji bent his ever-growing body and pulled up his socks. As he made sure he brought everything, he suddenly realized the faint call within his heart.

That was right, today was the beginning of a new school term. After the Opening Ceremony came the changing of class. Even though he had failed in attempting to change his image, it wasn't enough to make him depressed, as some hope still remained in Ryūji's heart. Or was that just expectation? Anyway, it was that sort of faint feeling, though he did not find it appropriate to express it.

"I'm going. Remember to lock the door, and change into your pajamas!"

"Ok~ay! Ah, hey Ryū-chan," Yasuko laid on the futon and bit the spoon with her molars. She began to smile

like a child. "Ryū-chan looks more energetic than usual today! Fight hard! You're a second year now! This is an area which Ya-chan has never been to before, you know."

In order to give birth to Ryūji, Yasuko dropped out of high school when she was still a first year, so she was not familiar with what life as a second year was like. Ryūji felt a sense of sadness for a moment.

"...yeah."

He smiled for a bit and raised his hand. This was to give his thanks to his mother. However, this well-intentioned act led to an unexpectedly bad result. " KYAA!" Yasuko yelled and began rolling to and fro, and finally said that phrase. She had finally said that phrase!

"Ryū-chan is sooo~ cool! You're looking more and more like your dad now!"

"!!!"

...she said it.

Ryūji silently closed the front door and looked towards the sky. He spun his eyes as he felt he was being sucked into a whirlpool beneath him. *NO! I don't want that! I don't want that! Just shut up!*

That! That's the one thing I don't want to hear. Especially today.

You look just like your dad — it seemed as though Yasuko didn't understand that this phrase caused Ryūji a lot of torment. It was also the reason he bought that kind of magazine and tried to make his bangs "float gently".

Leaving the house, Ryūji headed towards the school which was within walking distance. His tightened face looked twisted. Despite this, he still walked with great strides as though he was riding the wind. Sighing, he placed his fingers over his bangs in order to cover his eyes. This was a habit of Ryūji's. Indeed, the source of Ryūji's agony was none other than his eyes.

They were bad! It had nothing to do with his perfect eyesight. It was their appearance; they just looked fierce.

This past year Ryūji had been growing up at a rapid pace, he now had that manly look. Though he wasn't the

super-handsome type, he was not exactly the aloof geek either ...Ahem. Anyway, he didn't look bad, though no one else had said that; at least that was what Ryūji thought.

Yet his eyes were unusually fierce, they were so bad that it was no joking matter. His eyes were the sort that tilted upwards with the white parts occupying most of his eyes while his pupils took up a small section of them. Of course, these were just the basics, that was not the worst part. Since his eyes were big, the white in his eyes would constantly reflect a very strong, stinging glare, while his tiny pupils would move sharply as though they were about to slice the opponent before him, regardless of Ryūji's intentions. It was these eyes that usually led to a person running away at full speed upon coming into eye contact. He knew that all too well. In fact, when he saw a group photo with himself, even he would be at a loss after wondering, "Geez, why does he look so pissed ...Ah, is that me?"

On the other hand, it could be partly blamed on his rough personality. He spoke in quite an unrefined way, which had something to do with his extreme sensitivity. This was why he rarely joked around or said anything foolish. Maybe it was because of that, or maybe it was

because he lived with someone like Yasuko, which caused him to lose all virtuosity and trustworthiness. Above all else, Ryūji prided himself in being pragmatically protective of himself.

But, as a result...

"Ta–Takasu-kun...! Are you trying to defy a teacher!? S , someone! Bring me a baton!"

No I wasn't! I was just trying to apologize for forgetting to hand in my homework.

"I, I, I, I, I'm so sorry...I didn't mean to bump into you! It was that guy who pushed me over to you!"

Who is going to get mad over getting bumped on the shoulder?

"I heard Takasu-kun gatecrashed a graduation ceremony of some other school while he was in junior high, he even took over their broadcast room!"

Stop making me sound like I'm some sort of bad delinquent!

" — Am I going to get all these misunderstandings all over again?" Thinking back on all these painful memories , Ryūji couldn't help but sigh.

His grades were not bad, and he had never been late or absent. He hadn't even gotten into an argument with people, let alone into a fistfight. To put it simply, Takasu Ryūji was just a normal young person. Despite that, due to his fierce eyes, and it was only because of this, everyone had come to the conclusion that he was some kind of vicious delinquent — his only relative being a night hostess also indirectly lead to this conclusion.

After spending a year with his classmates, most of the misunderstandings had been resolved. A year was not short, especially for a high school student. The problem was that everything started anew today, not to mention that his effort at changing his image had ended in failure.

There was still something to look forward to in changing classes, since Ryūji wanted to be in the same class as a certain person. But when his thoughts moved to the torment that he would have to face afterwards, his

naïve expectations instantly shrunk in half. Not to mention Yasuko's big mouth. No, that was wrong! All the blame had to go to his father's troublesome genes!

"Your dad, huh? He's in heaven now. He was quite cool, used to calmly sweep his hair backwards, his sharp shoes were always shiny, and he always hung such a lo~ng gold chain around his neck while wearing a casual suit with his Rolex. Inside, he always stuffed a thick magazine.

"What for? When Ya-chan asked him that, he said 'So that I don't have to worry about getting stabbed.' Ahhh~ I was so moved~!"

All Ryūji could think of was how Yasuko swooned when talking about him, and then there was the sole photo of his father that was left behind. His father's pose was just as Yasuko had described him to be. Standing open-footed while looking proud, he carried a small briefcase under his armpit. He was dressed in a white suit with a flamboyant open neck shirt. The two golden rings on his fingers glittered and he even wore a diamond earring in one ear. And then there was his face that read "You talkin' to me?", with his chin pointing downwards towards the camera. One of his hands was

groping the breast of his mother, who looked much younger than she was now. His mother, carrying a pregnant belly, smiled cheerfully. His father even had a gold tooth as he smiled.

He was actually quite gentle, and serious, and would never hurt a normal person, or at least that was what Yasuko would say, but why on earth would a gentle and serious person become a gangster!? And who on earth would let such a young high school girl get pregnant? Most importantly, those eyes... If one were stared at by those sharp eyes, they would quickly hand over their wallets and hope nothing else bad happened. Those eyes were used for just that: violent extortion. And yet those objects were now fixed upon his face. Ryūji suddenly shuddered . If even he thought of his father that way, no wonder everyone still misunderstood *him*!

By the way, it was possible that his father was still alive. According to Yasuko, while helping an underling escape, he was beaten into a pulp and dropped to the bottom of Yokohama Harbor. However, there was no grave, no altar, no artefact, no epitaph, not even a body; there was no record of such an event ever happening. Sometimes a drunk Yasuko would jokingly say for no reason "I wonder what Ryū-chan would look like if your

dad were to suddenly return? Hohohoho, I'm just kidding!"

Dad is probably meditating in some icy cold room! As his son, I just feel that —

"Hey, Takasu! Morning! It's a great morning, isn't it?"

Hearing someone call him from behind, Ryūji quickly turned around and raised his hand, "Oh, Kitamura. Morning!"

Can't help it, if I stop and wait for my friend to catch up, people will think that I'm gonna strangle him to death, even though that's not the case. Ryūji silently considered this. Being misunderstood was unavoidable, and in such an event he would have to explain as nicely as he could. As long as he spent time on it, people would eventually understand. Though it was quite troublesome. That was the only thing he could do, so it was the only thing he had to do!

Looking up at the blue sky, the bright sunlight caused Ryūji to squint his eyes. Today was a fine day, there was no wind. The cherry blossoms silently wilted at this time of year and gently fell on Ryūji's head.

Ryūji continued to carry his torment and strode forward in his shiny black shoes. The weather sure was great for today's Opening Ceremony.

* * *

"Whoa! We're in the same class as Takasu, you gotta be kidding me!"

"He sure looks intimidating, how scary!"

"So who's going to go talk to him?"

"Nope, not me."

"Why don't you go? Hey! Don't push...!"

Say whatever you want, I am no longer affected by anything .

Ryūji entered the classroom in the most unfazed way possible, ignoring the glances of his classmates, and sat on his desk with his back towards them while staring into the distance with his sharp eyes. Licking his dry lips, his legs began to shake on their own. To a bystander, he looked like a vicious carnivore on the lookout for weak prey.

"Same as usual, huh? Looks like there will be guys that misunderstand you here as well. Oh well, it will all get sorted out after a while anyway! Besides, I'm with you, not to mention there's quite a number of our classmates from Class-A here."

"Oh, don't worry about that, I don't really mind."

Ryūji replied with a gentle smile to his good friend Kitamura Yūsaku, who was in his class again this year. Honestly, Ryūji was currently in a very good mood, but not in a way where he would cruelly lick his lips just before pouncing on his prey. If that were the case, he wouldn't be grinning from ear to ear and ready to lift off like a rocket. The reason he was happy was not because

of his relation with Kitamura. To a friend like him, Ryūji would simply smile gently and say, "Looks like we're in the same class again, Kitamura!" No, the reason he felt like blasting off like a rocket was because of —

"Oh! Kitamura-kun! We're in the same class this year!"

— her.

"Huh? Ah! Kushieda, you're also in Class-C?"

"Eh!? You mean you only just found out? How cold, at least check the class roster on the first day of school!"

"My bad. What a coincidence. This means we can have more time to sort out our club meetings!"

"Ahaha, that's right! Oh, Takasu-kun ...right? Do you still remember me? I appear in front of Kitamura-kun from time to time," she paused.

"..."

"Ah, um, is it okay if I call you Takasu-kun?"

"...Ah...er..."

At that moment an angel revealed herself. Before Ryūji's eyes was a smile that shone as brightly as the sun, as warm as the sunlight that used to dwell on the south window of his house, illuminating everything within his sight. The light rays were intensifying to the point where Ryūji could no longer keep his eyes open.

"Kushieda Minori, right?"

AHH! Dammit! I got the words right! But! His voice just sounded too cold. Ryūji felt like screaming. *Why did I only come up with a response like that? Why couldn't I come up with something better!?*

"Wow! You remembered my full name, I'm so glad!" She paused a bit, "Oh dear! Someone's calling me from over there! I have to go, Kitamura-kun. See you in the first club meeting of the term as second years! So don't forget! Takasu-kun, let's talk again some time!"

Seeing her turn around, Ryūji slowly and awkwardly raised his arm, but it was too late. She had already disappeared.

She said she was glad. She said we'll talk again some time.

Kushieda Minori.

She said she was glad. She said we'll talk again some time.

He finally got his wish of being in the same class as Kushieda Minori.

She said she was glad. She said we'll talk again some time.

She said, *She was glad...*

"Takasu?"

" —Whoa!?" Kitamura suddenly appeared before his face, causing him to fall over his chair.

"What're you grinning at?"

"No, it–it's nothing."

"Oh really?" Kitamura pushed up on the frame of his glasses with his middle finger. Ryūji felt very grateful from the bottom of his heart, for Kitamura might have been the only person in this world who could tell whether he was smiling or not. There was one more thing he was grateful to Kitamura for.

"...Kitamura, you," Ryūji fumbled his words. "How should I say this. Er–you always seem pretty relaxed when you talk to girls," Ryūji went down to a whisper, " like Kushieda-san!"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

The eyes behind Kitamura's glasses widened. He wasn't being humble. Rather, he was surprised. *Looks like*

he doesn't realize it himself. Ryūji decided to hold back what he was about to say to this rather dense person.

His leisurely conversation with Kushieda a while ago just sounded so "natural". No, it wasn't just a while ago. Since last year, Kitamura had always been able to speak with her naturally. Furthermore, they were both in the softball club! Ryūji was always there, constantly trying to give her a gentle smile or receive a greeting from her; it was an effort that could move one to tears.

To use soccer as a metaphor, Ryūji would be a center defender who hardly ever had any chance of participating in offense. It was also thanks to constantly being beside Kitamura and observing his cheerful conversations with Kushieda that Ryūji started to realize that she was really cute and that he liked her and wanted to become friends with her.

Her various cheerful expressions.

Her delicate body and exaggerated movements.

Her innocent smiles and clear voice.

Despite his intimidating appearance, she still managed to keep her usual cheerfulness in his presence, even to this day.

That's Kushieda Minori for you.

For Ryuji, all the elements that form her looked as sparkling as the rays of the sun. She was healthy and gentle, and for him, her pose was what a girl should be. But still —

"What're you talking about? How's it possible for me to talk naturally to girls? You should know very well what they like to call me!"

Ryūji couldn't help but sigh. *How enviable!* Just looking at the way Kitamura talked was enough to make his eyes bleed. Yet Kitamura continued, "I'm no good with girls. I think I probably won't ever find a girlfriend for the rest of my life."

Even though he wanted to answer with "I don't think so...", looking up at the blindingly radiant noble before him, Ryūji swallowed what he was about to say. No matter what he said, this fellow would probably never understand. Ryūji suddenly felt a wave of depression.

It was true that the girls called Kitamura "Maruo", after the typical "Mr. Nice Guy" from Chibi Maruko-chan . Perhaps there is some resemblance, explaining how he got the nickname. On top of this, he has many more traits : glasses with very high prescription, a straightforward personality, excellent grades, he doesn't follow the trend of being flirtatious, and holds quite traditional values. In the right situation, he would say "That's correct"; he is the sort of guy capable of creating a cheerful atmosphere in the classroom. Speaking of which, he is the former class representative, the current vice president of the Student Council, and the front-runner to be the new president of the softball team. It is natural for everyone to make fun of him.

His looks aren't the problem. No. To be precise, upon closer inspection one would discover that he is surprisingly handsome. Combined with his consistent personality inside and outside, as well as the ability to make fun of himself, there is absolutely nothing unlikeable about him. So although he claimed to be constantly teased by girls, it wasn't because they hated him.

Ah, so that's why, Ryūji finally understood. Come to think of it, Kitamura was quite popular with the girls, not

just with Kushieda; he was able to talk to all of them naturally. Whenever the girls saw him, they would go, " Ah~ I'm in the same class as Maruo again!" to which Kitamura would nonchalantly reply, "Oh? Is there a problem with that?"

And yet he claims that he's no good with girls. It's not as though they fear him like me. Just as Ryūji went into deep thought, he heard someone say "Whoa, scary."

See? Here we go again! Ryūji laid on top of his desk and ignored those voices that he would occasionally hear. Just a while ago he was floating over the moon from being in the same class as Kushieda Minori, so he did not mind others and what they thought of him.

"Sure looks formidable. I told you this guy isn't a normal person."

"Whoa, look at those eyes. If you piss the owner of those eyes off, you could get killed!"

The spell seemed to have been broken. Ryūji started to notice that the non-malicious whispers began to increase.

It might be better to hide in the bathroom until the new homeroom teacher arrives, Ryūji thought hopefully. It would clear his mind a bit.

So he stood up, and just as he was about to walk through the door, he felt something bump into his stomach. "Hmm...?"

Ryūji thought he had bumped into something, but there was nothing in front of his eyes. *That's strange.* Ryūji moved his eyes around, yet all he could see was —

Students started calling out,

"Yikes! As expected from Takasu-kun; is he going to make the first move?"

"Has the death-match started already? When I saw the class roster, I knew this was going to be a terrible class."

All Ryūji could see were the new classmates whispering amongst themselves. *Are they talking about me ? But still, why?*

One of the members in the class came up with a title, " Clash of the Titans. Hmm?"

"We're already in the final showdown."

Everyone was talking strangely. Clash of the Titans? Final showdown? What the hell are they talking about? Ryūji tilted his head trying to make sense of what was going on.

"Are you not even going to apologize after bumping into someone?" He heard a very cold voice emanating from somewhere. The strange and calm tone of voice sounded as though it was suppressing and holding back some emotion that was about to explode. Yet he could not tell where the voice came from.

"Huh?"

The mood became dark. Ryūji glanced to the right, there was no one; he glanced to the left, there was no one there as well; apprehensively, he looked upwards. Fortunately, there was no one there either.

"That means — "

So it did come from below. Down, right below his eyes , in a place much lower than Ryūji's chest, was a head of hair. The first thing he thought was that she resembled a doll.

Anyway, she was very small. Her long straight hair softly fluttered and covered the tiny body of the Palmtop Tiger. "Palmtop Tiger?"

That mysterious terminology suddenly appeared in Ryūji's thoughts, causing him to say it out loud without thinking. Seems like he must have heard someone whispering that nearby.

Palmtop Tiger!?

Then that means...

"Who– "

Is that what this little doll is called? Though she is small enough to fit into a palm, how is she like a tiger?

" –who you calling a Palmtop Tiger?" This was not an occasion where one could think for a long time, as whatever it was began to lift her chin, and with her eyes...

"WHOA!!"

It took three seconds. Everything went silent, though perhaps it was only Ryūji's imagination. For an instant, it felt like a vacuum created by a shock wave just after an explosion. The background noise slowly returned to everyone's ears. By the time he realized it, Ryūji found that he had fallen backwards onto the ground. It wasn't just him, the few classmates nearby were hit as well and moaned, while others were already getting ready to escape.

Just what happened? *I already know. Nothing really happened.* It was just that this *girl* before his eyes —

"Such a hopeless person."

All she did was stare at Ryūji with those two large eyes of hers, nothing more.

That was it. Within a few seconds, Ryūji had already been struck down by awe. His mind went blank, his body felt paralyzed just by the sheer pressure she created . Ryūji was repelled by her glare, or to be more precise, he was repelled by the aura that emanated from her eyes, causing him to fall on the ground.

Their difference was way too large, they were on completely different levels. For a person whose eyes were no less intimidating, Ryūji had been completely defeated.

This was the first time Ryūji understood what it meant to have fierce eyes. It included the necessary essence one carries, as well as a ferociousness to match; or to be more exact, an "intent to kill."

"Hmph." After a few seconds that felt like an eternity, her fierce eyes that pierced his heart deeply got a little calmer at last, and changed to what had contempt.

"A dragon...? How lame." She opened her cherry lips and shot out words like bullets that carried a certain child-like quality to them. Her incredibly small hands roughly swept aside her fluttering hair, while her soft eyelids hid her killing intent. Those eyes were now as transparent as the glass eyes of a doll and stared coldly at Ryūji.

The awful thing was that — she was cute. She had a pale white face, unbelievably long brunette hair, and tiny limbs and shoulders, while her shiny pupils were surrounded by gentle eyelashes. She was as adorable as a candy containing deadly toxins, as lovable as a flower that could kill just by scent alone.

Yet when she stared at him, Ryūji could feel the carnivore leaping out from those eyes of hers. Of course,

this was all just an illusion, yet it felt more real than reality. The carnivore's weight had knocked Ryūji down on the floor and it roared with a sound that shook deep into his blood. The sound it produced seemed to be saying, "I can take out a guy like you anytime I want." The sharp claws and fangs slowly approached him, emanating a sense of bloodthirstiness and the scent of a beast. Compared to her small figure, the much larger illusion that loomed before him was...a tiger.

"Ah, ahh–ah, ah, ahhh...t–that's right." Without realizing it, Ryūji began to nod and clapped his hands. *So that's why she's called the Palmtop Tiger! I wonder who gave her that name, but —*

" — Isn't that a wonderful name?"

And such a fitting name as well, I'm impressed. The girl glanced at Ryūji, silently uttered "dragon", and then looked at him with disdain.

It was not hard to see why. Whether from the fall or from being ripped open by the phantom tiger, Ryūji's gakuran jacket was now open. Under his jacket, he wore a colorful "Soryū (Rising Dragon)" T-shirt that Yasuko had happily bought for him. It wasn't like Ryūji had

wanted to wear a T-shirt that would cause such misunderstandings, it was just that all his other clothes were taken to the laundry for that day and he wasn't expecting anyone to be able see what he was wearing inside with his jacket on.

Feeling embarrassed for some reason, Ryūji quickly covered his chest, like a girl that just got assaulted by a ruffian. At that moment, he saw someone tip-tapping her way closer.

"You're late, Taiga! You skipped the Opening Ceremony, didn't you?"

"I overslept. Anyway, I'm glad I'm in the same class as Minorin this year."

"Yeah! Me too!"

It was none other than Kushieda Minori. She directly called the Palmtop Tiger "Taiga", and even smiled and gently caressed her hair, while the Palmtop Tiger also intimately called her "Minorin". Watching all of this, Ryūji began to hear the whispers around him.

"So Round 1 is won by the Palmtop Tiger Aisaka?"

"Looks like Takasu is only scary in appearance, he's no delinquent!"

"Huh? Really?"

"That's why he lost to the Palmtop Tiger. Besides, she's the real thing when it comes to ferociousness!"

The misunderstandings were resolved much sooner than Ryūji had expected, however...

* * *

The Palmtop Tiger had an amazing name called Aisaka Taiga. Her height was 145 cm. Aisaka Taiga and Kushieda Minori were what you would call good friends. From the various whispers Ryūji had heard, it was rumored her father worked as a fixer in the underworld.

There was another story that her father was actually a karate master ruling the underworld in America. And then there was yet another that said she herself was a karate expert, but was expelled from her dojo for attacking her master.

Back when she first entered this school, a lot of people were fooled by her beauty, and many guys lined up to confess to her. Of course their dreams were all ruthlessly shattered as they were intimidated, bitten, torn to shreds. .. There were quite a few that never did recover after they were mercilessly belittled by her. Wherever Aisaka went, her path was drenched with the blood of countless corpses of male students.

There was just a lot of bad press concerning Aisaka Taiga. Regardless of whether the rumors were true or not , there was no doubt that she was the most dangerous being in this school. It was many days after the Opening Ceremony that Ryūji learned about these things.

Chapter 2

Though it began quite tumultuously, Takasu Ryūji's new life as a second year high school student went rather smoothly.

This was due to many reasons.

The rumor that "Takasu-kun is a delinquent" got clarified much earlier than Ryūji's pessimistic self could ever have imagined. Luckily, many of Ryūji's old classmates, including Kitamura, were also in the same class this year. More importantly, he was defeated by the Palmtop Tiger in a matter of seconds, leading everyone to quickly conclude that he was just a 'normal guy' (Ryūji even wanted to sincerely thank Aisaka Taiga just for that).

Secondly, he avoided having to do annoying work in the class committee and his seat that was chosen through the drawing of lots was the third seat from the front in the window aisle - it was a great seat where he could sit back and relax. The homeroom teacher was the same as last year's (Koigakubo Yuri, 29 years old, and an

unquestionably single lady); aside from her still being single at such an age, Ryūji had no beef with her.

Besides...

"...If I do that, then the sides of the bucket will harden! What's that called? You mean the part near the edge? But since the middle is still watery, when I pour the soft jelly by the edges like this I'll have to..."

"Ow!"

"Wah, Takasu-kun! I'm sorry..."

The most important reason was this:

His sunshine, Kushieda Minori, had now become his classmate. It was this reason alone that made Ryūji's daily life as colorful as a rose and as dazzling as sunlight. .. Even after she had accidentally poked him in the eye, her sparkle hardly diminished and it went on brightening his heart.

"A, are you alright? I'm so sorry, I didn't notice you behind me! Uwaa... Did my middle finger just poke into the white bit of your eye?"

"...Don't worry about it, it's nothing."

"I'm so very sorry! Hmm, where were we? Oh yeah, I was saying, I have to pour the jelly in the bucket like this. .."

"Ow!"

"Wah...! It looks like I poked it even deeper! I'm so sorry!"

It's okay, I'm fine, Ryūji gestured with a wave of his hand. Even this was a blessing for him. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!" said Minori as she bowed her head, which gave off a delicate fragrance. No matter what, Minori, who was currently apologizing to him, had her eyes only on him, so even when his eyes got poked twice, it was a small price to pay to be able to experience such bliss.

He wouldn't have minded it even if she wasn't talking to him. He would be just as happy if she were just speaking to someone sitting near him, since he would be able to hear Minori's cute voice. In trying to describe how big the bucket was, she waved her hands to mimic a circle shape; and every time she did so, she would come into contact with him (even though it was just his eyeballs).

But, just what is this bucket thing that she's talking about? Noticing Ryūji's puzzled expression, she explained,

"We're talking about the pudding that I made using a bucket."

Minori grabbed her finger tightly (Hopefully this time I won't poke into anyone!) as she explained in a serious tone. Though 'explain' didn't seem to be the right word...

"Does Takasu-kun like pudding?"

We're having a conversation! Ryūji's heart started to beat so rapidly that he wasn't able to utter a decent word, his anxiousness was driving him mad. After waiting so long for this chance...

"...Er..."

And that was all he could muster. *She's probably thinking how boring this guy is... Probably thinking about not ever speaking to this guy ever again...* While Ryūji frantically tried to think of what to do, Minori continued musing about her ultimate desire to make pudding in a bucket.

"But I haven't been successful. Maybe it was because it was too big, so it's hard for it to have the sticky and soft bits gel together in one shape... Oh yeah, I can show it to you as well, Takasu-kun! Think of it as an apology for poking you in the eye!"

"Eh? ...S...Show me...?"

Could it be that she wants me to try her pudding? Ryūji's eyes became sharper as he stared at Minori's cute smile. Minori nodded and replied,

"Yeah, I'll show you. Let me go and get it."

Could I get any luckier than this? I'm glad I got poked in the eye! As Ryūji watched Minori excitedly walk towards her desk, he suddenly felt like running away for some reason.

If she really brought the pudding over, what expression should I have when eating it? It's not lunch time now, so it'll look weird for a guy to feast hard on just a pudding. Besides, if she brings the pudding, should I eat it right away? Or should I just thank her and put it away for later?

"Damn... I, I don't know already...!"

Nervously, he began to caress his face. *No matter what, I should at least clear my desk.* He had decided to just eat it on the spot.

Feeling excited, Ryūji's heart beat even faster. He slowly moved his gaze away from Minori, who had just come back, since she was just too dazzling to look at directly. Minori revealed a cheerful smile and tilted her head as she stood in front of him, and then...

"Here you go, Takasu-kun,"

Through her very tender voice, Ryūji thought he could even see a heart shape appearing after she had uttered ' Takasu-kun.' Slowly lifting his head in trepidation, Ryūji politely received the object that she gave him.

"...Ah, um. This..."

It was much thinner and lighter than he had expected..
.

"...This sure is a great photo..."

"But it looks gross, doesn't it?"

So she's showing me photos, not pudding. Even though the stuff shown in the photo did look gross, it was still mind-blowing. On top of a plastic mat stood a large bucket, and it contained some sort of light yellowish cream... No, it looked more like slime. Though saying this would have been disrespectful to Minori, it just didn't look like pudding. In the second photo, the slime was being slowly and stickily poured out, leaving the whole place splotched with solid and watery substances. And then, in the third photo...

"It even smelled strange... I think it's because I didn't wash the bucket thoroughly!"

Minori knelt on one leg while eating the piece of slime with a big spoon. *I want that photo!* Just as Ryūji was thinking about that...

"Thanks for looking! I still need to show these to Taiga as well. Eh? Where'd she go? She was here a minute ago."

Coolly taking back her photos, Minori quickly left Ryūji behind and ran off to look for the Palmtop Tiger, Aisaka Taiga, who was listening only a moment ago. Thus ended a blissful period.

...Still need to show these to Taiga... Eh?

Ryūji sighed as he saw his crush leave the classroom in search of her good friend.

He was very lucky to be classmates with her. He was able to see Minori anytime during school, so he no longer had to sneak past her classroom and peek through the door just to have a look at her smile. Even a center back defender gets his chance at scoring goals. If this was not being lucky, he didn't know what was.

But in order to get even closer to her, there was one obstacle he had to pass through... And that was Aisaka Taiga, who was always seen standing next to Minori, at all times.

Ever since the Opening Ceremony, Ryūji had tried to keep his distance from Aisaka. It seemed like she was a very difficult person to handle, but if he avoided Aisaka, he would not be able to get closer to Minori, and that was the worst outcome for him (although this wasn't the only reason he hadn't been able to strike up a conversation with Minori).

Aisaka didn't seem to register Ryūji on her radar in any way, while Ryūji tried to avoid any opportunity of them coming into contact with each other; so far she had not made herself a hindrance.

Ryūji's main goal was to try and get rid of the Palmtop Tiger and approach Minori alone. If he could accumulate those lucky moments like before, it might still be possible .

And so, Ryūji's bittersweet life had been going quite smoothly.

...Until today, that is, just after school.

* * *

"WHOA...!"

As he opened the classroom door, he was left speechless by what he saw inside...

There were two, no, three chairs being thrown in the air.

This was followed by a loud crashing noise as they landed on the floor. Amidst the loud noise and flying chairs, a figure could be seen flashing before his eyes.

What on earth just happened? Ryūji wondered, blinking his ferocious eyes. In truth, he was so terrified he couldn't catch his breath.

As the duty student in charge, he had to leave the classroom to take care of some stuff, so it wasn't until some time after school that he was able to return. Normally, there wouldn't be anyone left in the classroom by then, but what he saw...

There was no doubt about it, he saw a girl in a uniform there just a moment ago. Perhaps spotting Ryūji entering, she quickly hurled herself into the dark corner of the classroom cabinet and hid herself there. At the same time

, Ryūji also saw the chairs being kicked into the air and crashing with a loud noise. Despite this, he could still see that person very clearly right now, since there was a mirror at the top corner of the classroom, which completely reflected her back and head of hair.

Incredibly, that clumsy fellow tried to hide her arms and legs by squatting there quietly. She apparently did not notice the mirror above her, as she even stuck her neck out to check out Ryūji's whereabouts.

Gulp! Ryūji swallowed and pretended that he didn't see anything. This was because of that tiny fellow... The one with the nickname Palmtop Tiger. Just seeing her back's reflection on the mirror was enough to tell who she was. That long hair and pale white face... Besides, for someone this small, the only person Ryūji could think of was Aisaka. She was probably moaning *Why'd he have to appear now!?*

As a result, Ryūji decided that he saw nothing, heard nothing, and knew nothing at all.

After making that decision, Ryūji decided to enter the classroom. Though he didn't want to enter a place where (for whatever reason) the Palmtop Tiger was hiding, he had left his bag inside and couldn't leave without it.

The sunset-filled classroom was silent, it was as if Aisaka were a spider weaving her web, or setting up a powerful forcefield, which upon entering caused one to feel the strain in all his bones. Ryūji cautiously walked slowly, trying very hard to walk at a pace as though nothing had happened, trying not to excite Aisaka and trying not to react as though he knew she was there...

"Ah..."

One moment of carelessness and the whole classroom was filled by the nervous shout.

The object that rolled out threw all of Ryūji's efforts out the window. By rolling herself up tightly, Aisaka Taiga had lost her balance and rolled all the way out from the corner of the cabinet. Unfortunately for her, she stopped right in front of Ryūji.

"..."

"..."

Aisaka looked up, while Ryūji looked down. This was no longer a distance where one could pretend nothing had happened. Both exchanged wordless glances for a few seconds...

"Are you... okay?"

Ryūji managed to squeeze these words out of his throat. He hesitatingly tried to stretch his arm out to Aisaka, who was trying to get up, but all he got in response was a few inaudible words, something like "I don't need your help" or "mind your own business." Aisaka's piercing glance shot at Ryūji through her bangs.

Ryūji couldn't help but back off, giving Aisaka enough space to get up totteringly. She lowered her head as she patted the dust off her skirt and kept her distance from Ryūji, with her back towards the window and her piercing eyes fixed on her prey. It didn't seem like she intended to leave the classroom. *Shouldn't she feel embarrassed?* Perhaps this type of thinking did not apply to the Palmtop Tiger.

If Aisaka was to remain in this classroom, then it was all the more reason for Ryūji to leave as quickly as possible.

"Ah yeah, the bag..."

As if deliberately letting Aisaka hear that, Ryūji rushed to get his bag.

Aisaka Taiga continued to stand by the window while silently watching Ryūji. Ryūji had no idea what her expression was, since he was afraid to look at her. In any case, he walked as silently as possible in order to reduce his presence. As Ryūji traversed the classroom, his face shuddered as it was stared at by Aisaka's eyes. *I must not react. I must not provoke her. I just need to walk casually...*

His bag wasn't on his desk though. He remembered that he had been speaking to Kitamura while on the way out, and had placed his bag on Kitamura's desk. Once he retrieved that, all he had to do was leave the classroom. Suppressing his anxiety, he slowly approached his bag, 20cm left, 10cm...

"AH!"

...He jumped up.

What happened?

Does Aisaka Taiga intend to stop me? Ryūji turned his head in trepidation and looked at the little doll standing by the window.

"W, what is it?"

"...W...What. Are. You. Doing?"

Something unbelievable had happened here... the Palmtop Tiger suddenly looked anguished to the point of fainting.

"...I, I'm just here to get my bag, and... Ai, Aisaka? What's wrong? You've looked strange for some time now ."

Her tiny cherry lips opened and closed, while she paced backwards and forwards as though she was dancing some strange dance, while her fingers quivered before her face.

"Y, y, y, you said, your bag? But isn't your desk over there? W, w, w, why, why is it t, t, t, t, there?"

She was stuttering while admonishing Ryūji.

"...Why is it there? I was speaking to Kitamura when I got called out by the teacher...so I just placed it there... WHOA!"

Aisaka, who was supposed to be standing a few meters away, had shortened the distance between them in an instant and appeared before his face. Just where did she get such amazing mobility with such a small body?

"...! ...! ...!"

"Wait, h, hold it!? Ai, Ai...saka?!"

With great strength she grabbed at Ryūji's bag, which he clutched to his chest, trying to pry it away from him.

"J, just lend it to me...! Let go!"

At such a close distance, Ryūji could see that Aisaka's face was redder than the sunset outside. Her cute face was distorted like a demon, and her expression was terrifying.

"Lend it... to you?! Stop fooling around...!"

"Umph~!"

He couldn't push her off, so Ryūji decided to hold his ground by standing firm, since if he let go now, Aisaka's little body would fly off quite far.

So much for being considerate of her.

"Uuuuuuuummmph~!"

Aisaka twisted her hips and grabbed the bag with both arms, the eyes on her red face now shut tightly, while the veins on her forehead were beginning to show. She was trying to win this by sheer brute force.

Finger by finger, Ryūji was slowly losing his grip on his bag. Even his feet, which he had anchored onto the ground, were beginning to get dragged. To put it bluntly, he was close to losing.

"H, hey, that's dangerous... Let, go, now!"

"Uuuuuuuuuummmph... Ah...? Ahhhh..."

I'm not gonna make it...! Just as Ryūji was thinking of that, he suddenly saw Aisaka look dizzy and fall backwards, her tiny hands spreading open towards the ground, letting go of his bag... *She let go?!*

"...AHHHH!!!"

"ACHOO!"

Crash!

The "...AHHHH!!!" belonged to Ryūji, the "ACHOO!" belonged to Aisaka, while the crashing sound was Ryūji again. They were, respectively, Ryūji screaming in terror, Aisaka sneezing, and Ryūji knocking his head on something.

As Aisaka had released her hands when she suddenly sneezed, Ryūji naturally lost his balance and fell backwards. He held on tight to his bag as he fell and knocked his head on the teacher's desk.

"Owwww... That hurts! Y, you... Just what the hell were you doing... That h]]]urt, you know? ... I could've been killed!"

He protested, teary-eyed.

"Ugh..."

Aisaka made a strange sneezing noise, ignoring what was going on around her. After causing Ryūji to lose his balance, she sniffed and then collapsed in the aisle between the desks.

"Ai, Aisaka?! Hey, you alright?"

Her long hair was lying on the floor, her tiny body curled up, and she moaned silently. There was no response. *Could she be feeling unwell?* Ryūji rubbed the back of his head while running towards her to get a closer look. The face which had been bright red a short while ago was now devoid of color, her quivering lips were now as white as a piece of paper, while her forehead was sweating.

"Whoa... You, you look pale! Are you anemic? Hey, grab my hand."

She was the same as Yasuko. This time he didn't hesitate and stretched out his hand...

"...!"

The hand Ryūji held out was slapped away by Aisaka's icy cold hand. Though she was shivering a lot, Aisaka still managed to get herself up by grabbing onto a desk.

"Ai, Aisaka! Are you alright?"

Still no response. With every step she made, the desk she held onto would shake, while her long soft hair would flutter. Her tiny figure seemed intent on running away as quickly as possible. As she was sitting up a while ago, her skirt was slightly rolled up revealing her tiny and smooth thighs.

"Wait, wouldn't it be better for you to head to the school clinic?"

While it sounded nosy, he couldn't just leave her alone , but right as he was about to follow...

"Stay away... Pighead!"

She told him in a fierce tone that sounded like she was being forced into a corner. Ryūji stopped his footsteps at once. *If she still has the energy to yell, that means she's okay, right...?*

"W, what a mess..."

Ryūji, now alone, sighed exhaustedly.

Aisaka's footsteps in the corridor became softer and softer, while only the person who was called a pighead remained in the classroom.

His head still hurting from that fall, he took a look at his bag, which, like that baby in the famous Ooka Tadasuke case, was nearly torn in half, and was now covered in Aisaka's scratch marks. The originally tidy desks and chairs were now totally messed up, this was just unacceptable.

What a mess.

The tables, Aisaka, all of it was a mess. What a troublesome fellow.

Being sensitive to things like this, Ryūji began to tidy up the desks, all the while trying to make sense out of what had just happened. All in a supposedly empty classroom after school, Aisaka Taiga rolling out before him, his bag nearly being taken away, her sneezing, his head getting knocked, the girl's anemia... No, he just could not figure out what this was all about.

"I'm no good with these kinds of puzzling things..."

Ryūji muttered and sighed to himself.

It would be three more hours before Ryūji could really make sense of what just happened.

* * *

To Kitamura Yūsaku-kun, From Aisaka Taiga

"T, this is... AH...!"

7pm. As Yasuko had to go to work with her colleagues that night, she had left earlier than usual. After making dinner for one person, Ryūji finally made some sense of that mysterious event after school.

It was when he returned to his four-and-a-half tatami-matted room to begin doing his homework and opened his bag to take out his books that he noticed that thing...

It was a light pink envelope. *Is that the kind of paper they call washi?* There were lots of silvery cherry blossom patterns all over the semi-transparent paper.

The front of the envelope read: "To Kitamura-kun"

While the back read: "From Aisaka Taiga. I spent a lot of time writing this. If this troubles you, please throw it away at once!"

The words were written in a light-blue ink.

It didn't seem like an invitation to a duel, nor did it look like a class committee memo, and it definitely was no I.O.U. note.

"C, could this be... a love letter...!?"

This was very unexpected.

Feeling curious, Ryūji squinted his fierce eyes, not because he was mad, but because he was feeling extremely distressed.

To put it simply, the Palmtop Tiger had gotten the wrong bag. Thinking this was Kitamura's bag, she had quietly stuffed the envelope in. It also explained why she was trying so hard to snatch the bag away from him.

"... This, you stuck it in my bag by mistake, right? I didn't read any of the contents inside, so I don't know what it's saying. So you can have it back..."

Ryūji began to practice how to feign ignorance when returning the letter.

"That's just impossible!"

But it only lasted a moment. *I can't do this, it's just too difficult. I can no longer just say that I don't know anything! But I can't think of anything better. That does it, I'm just gonna have to return this nonchalantly to Aisaka as though nothing happened! That's all I can do.*

Although it is a love letter, maybe she doesn't know that I know it's one, so I don't have to say anything specific and

make things even more complicated. Though it's quite impossible, there's no other way out of this. In order to avoid embarrassing Aisaka, hurting her pride and causing her to hate herself, this is the only way.

Ryūji forced himself to accept this train of thought and prepared to stick that dangerous object back inside the bag, then something unexpected happened...

"...Eh..."

His heart suddenly stopped for a while.

In order not to mess up the envelope, Ryūji carefully placed it on his palm, yet it suddenly opened on its own. *NO! Don't open!* Though he yelled in the bottom of his heart, the seal on the envelope, which was already quite loose, still popped open due to the pressure exerted by its own weight, causing Ryūji to lose his breath momentarily.

And so, a criminal that selfishly opens letters meant for other people was born.

"No, no.... NO! But I didn't see anything inside! That's right! I gotta glue it back...! Then no one will find out!"

That's right! Inko-chan parroted from the living room. Ryūji frantically looked for the glue inside his drawer. Finally finding the glue, Ryūji was about to glue the envelope back without any trace when...

"...Eh, ehhh~?"

Ryūji was so surprised that he stopped what he was doing.

There was no letter inside the long envelope. After hesitating for a while, he reopened the envelope again, took a peek inside, and made sure by shining light through the semi-transparent envelope... There was nothing inside.

... What... the... hell!?

Ryūji fell face flat on his table. *The hell? Seriously, quit fooling around already! ... She sure is hopeless!*

Aisaka Taiga, you really are an idiot!

Hiding in a place where I can see you, rolling out right in front of me, getting the wrong bag, wasting energy trying to grab that bag, sneezing, fainting... All this just to retrieve an envelope that is empty... There's a limit to being stupid!

After coming to his senses, Ryūji went back to foolishly trying to glue back the empty envelope, since he was already feeling dejected.

I wonder if I can still pretend that nothing has happened when I return this to Aisaka tomorrow? Once he realized how stupid the whole thing was, Ryūji prayed that he wouldn't laugh out loud at that time, as he might just get eaten alive by the Palmtop Tiger.

In any case, the matter should be settled by now.

As the incredible night became darker...

2am.

Ryūji suddenly woke up and opened his eyes drowsily .

He seemed to have dreamt of something... After taking a look at his clock, he scratched his stomach and wondered. He used to be able to sleep all the way till

morning, so why did he wake up halfway tonight? Ryūji had no idea.

Could it be because he was only wearing his T-shirt and boxers? Ryūji shivered even though it was already the middle of April... Maybe it had something to do with him sleeping with the window open? As the Bourgeoisie-style apartment block was just opposite the window, security for the house had become quite lax. Though he reckoned there was nothing in the house worth stealing, Ryūji still closed the window and made sure it was locked.

After getting out of his bed (which he bought himself), feeling uneasy, Ryūji gave a weak yawn. Was it a bad dream? His heart was beating rapidly... as though someone was watching him... he felt a strange atmosphere he couldn't quite describe.

"... Calm down..."

Walking wobbly on the tatami, he wondered if something had happened at Yasuko's work place. He checked the phone display, but there were no calls from the bar. *Maybe I'm thinking too much.* Ryūji sighed, *Since I'm out of bed, I might as well go to the bathroom.* So he

began to walk barefooted on the wooden tiles of the kitchen towards the bathroom.

At that moment...

"...WHOA...!?"

He felt a cool swishing sound near his neck. As he instinctively tried to turn around, his foot landed on a newspaper lying on the ground and he fell beautifully backwards. *Thud!* He landed on his backside, causing a tremor to go from his hips all the way to his head and causing him to lose his breath for a moment.

"......!"

He could not even scream as a result.

With great intensity, something had just slashed through where Ryūji's head was just a moment before. After missing Ryūji, the object hit onto something by Ryūji's side and made a loud and terrifying smashing sound.

"...Uuu..."

Within the dark two-room one-kitchen apartment stood a suspicious silhouette. That person once again raised up the stick-like object and went straight for Ryūji. .. Ryūji was being attacked!

But, why!? Is this a dream? Somebody help!

Ryūji rolled along the floor silently. *Should I turn on the lights? Or call the cops? Or the landlady?* His mind was blank, he could not think of what to do, and his body was so stiff that all he could do was dodge the attacks and try and crawl towards the entrance, but...

"UWAAAAAAA!"

He was about to get hit! The weapon was aimed directly at his head! Out of reflex, Ryūji stuck both his hands out and tried to stop it...

"Ah... I, I actually caught it...!"

He couldn't believe he was able to catch it, though he only caught it due to luck.

"...Ugh...!"

As the weapon was caught, the intruder tried to push through with brute force. Ryūji also gave everything without holding back. The two forces silently pushed against each other as their shadows fluttered in the darkness. Then he distinguished a small figure and what seemed to be long hair over the figure... *It can't be!?* Ryūji appeared to grasp the identity of the intruder; in fact, he had already noticed it from the beginning.

Gritting his teeth while holding back, Ryūji came to a conclusion. *It has to be! Who else besides that fellow could do something this messed up!?*

But just as he was about to verify the identity of the intruder... *Ahh! I'm not gonna make it!* His trembling arms were about to give in, even his hard neck was near its limit. *I'm gonna die...*

"...Heh...AHH..."

ACHOO!

The balance was broken in an instant!

As the strange sneezing noise was made, the incredible pressure suddenly disappeared, yielding to the force that Ryūji still exerted. The intruder was pushed back while

crying out softly, "Ah, wah!" before wobbling backwards and falling softly onto the bed. Ryūji quickly stood up and turned on the lights...

"Aisaka!"

"..."

"Use a tissue, dammit!"

Ryūji tossed a tissue box towards the Palmtop Tiger, Aisaka Taiga, who was rubbing her nose with her dress as though nothing had happened.

* * *

Her long hair fluttered on her back. She was wearing a loose one-piece dress, separated into many layers via soft

laces. This was definitely an appropriate outfit for her small figure...

"G, give me that wooden sword..."

Ryūji regretted not confiscating Aisaka Taiga's weapon a while ago...

He could have taken it when he turned on the lights, he could have taken it while handing her the tissue, in the end, the crisis still remained unresolved. Aisaka's eyes glittered like a tiger spotting it's prey, and began circling around the narrow room. Of course, Ryūji also kept his distance from her, circling around the room in his boxers.

This can't go on forever. As he thought of that...

"Aisaka... I know what you're thinking, you want me to return that love... letter, right? The letter that you placed in my bag by mistake."

"...!"

Just after Ryūji got the courage to speak, at that instant , Aisaka, who was still silently prowling, suddenly grew very big in appearance... or so she appeared to be. She

was like a bomb about to explode... with the trigger already ignited.

"I, I'll return the letter to you! So please calm down! I didn't read anything inside!"

"... Do you think you can get away just by returning it to me?!"

She growled in a deep tone as though she was about to leap up and attack,

"Don't be ridiculous... Since you already know of the existence of that letter..."

Whoosh! The huge wooden blade elegantly swerved over Ryūji's head.

"PREPARE TO DIE!"

"WHOA!!!"

She charged straight at Ryūji with her wooden blade aiming directly at Ryūji's head. *How can she be so fast?* From a few meters a moment ago, she had already reached Ryūji's chest, and had the wooden blade not missed and smashed the wall (*My deposit!*), Ryūji would have been killed.

"Damn!"

"Shit!"

With tears in his eyes, Ryūji tried to escape from this place and yelled at the top of his lungs,

"What kind of person would want to kill her own classmate?!"

"Shut up! Since you already know about that letter, how do you expect me to continue showing my face around? Only death can save me from something this embarrassing!"

She pointed the edge of her blade towards Ryūji's throat.

"Hey! If death is the only way out, why am I the one that has to die!?"

Ryūji instinctively and miraculously dodged the attack , but Aisaka's strength was too great and tore through the fusuma (*I just refitted that!*). Without any sign of hesitation, her eyes read *I'll kill you with all my might!*

"I don't want to die yet, so I'll have to kill you instead! Sorry about that, so hurry up and die! If not, then erase all your memories of it!"

"That's impossible!"

"Of course it's possible, as long as I use this..."

She looked at her shiny wooden blade,

"All I need to do is just hit you on the head with this, it won't be enough to kill you, but it'll probably wipe out all of your memories!"

"Don't go around erasing my memories on your own!"

How can she be so inconsiderate!? It's pointless trying to argue with her, we just cannot communicate. Common sense,

ethics, consideration for other people, all these do not apply to Aisaka.

Ahh! That was why I didn't want to have anything to do with her!

In contrast to Ryūji, who was nearly coughing up blood, Aisaka was busy wreaking havoc in the whole place. In order to attack Ryūji, who kept running away, she smashed the basket on top of the cupboard, poked a hole in the fusuma, and kicked the small table over while yelling,

"Remove that love letter from your memories!"

Aren't you just admitting that you wrote that yourself, you Palmtop Tiger!? Nobody would have known that was a love letter if you hadn't said anything (since it can be ambiguously mentioned away). Great, now she's openly admitted it and made things even messier. No, from the moment I got involved with Aisaka, everything has been a mess, not to mention...

"You saw it, didn't you!? You saw it! You must think I'm an idiot... an... idiot... sniff, sniff, uuu..."

"Wha!? Hey! Wait... are you... crying?"

"No I'm not!"

From her fierce howl one could sense a long suppressed sigh being released, the eyes that were aiming at Ryūji were now a little red and the corners looked a bit watery. Aisaka looked like she was crying a bit. *But I should be the one that's crying... It'd be great if I could just cry without having to move around, but this is now a matter of life and death...*

Argh, dammit, just what the hell is this!? Why am I the one being attacked? It's as though I've done something bad.

Ryūji had had enough, he decided to put himself at the mercy of fate. After pretending to dodge around for a while, he determinedly grabbed Aisaka's wrist. At that moment, Ryūji felt that her hands were so small they could easily be twisted that he began to feel afraid again.

"Let me go!"

He had to take out his trump card now. At this point he slowly breathed in. *I'm sorry, my neighbors! Forgive me, Mrs. Landlady!* He then shouted with every ounce of his strength,

"I won't let go! You listen to me, Aisaka! You've just made a terrible mistake! That envelope you stuffed in..."

"Let... me... go..."

After forcefully shaking off Ryūji's grip, she could now attack him at a very close distance! As Aisaka's eyes glittered with an intent to kill...

"IT'S EMPTY!!!"

Ryūji's yell came just in time.

The wooden blade stopped just above Ryūji's head, very nearly razing through some of his hair. An awkward silence followed. After a few seconds, she finally squeezed out a few words,

"... It's... empty...?"

Her child-like voice asked Ryūji that, to which Ryūji nodded his head vigorously.

"T, that's right, it's empty... that's why I said I didn't see anything inside, and, oh yeah, it's fortunate you didn't hand this to Kitamura. Do you have any idea you were this close to becoming a major laughing stock?"

The watery eyes widened as Aisaka stood motionless. Taking this chance, Ryūji quickly crawled away from her and into his room on the other side of the fusuma. His hands trembling as he frantically tried to search for that envelope inside his bag.

"Here! You see, you see?"

With veins showing in his eyes, Ryūji stuffed the envelope into her tiny hands. Her wooden blade made a sound as it was dropped to the ground, she began to wobble, though she still supported herself by standing with her legs opened, and examined the envelope through the light.

"... Ah..."

Her little cherry lips opened slightly.

"Ah, ah... Ahhh... AHHH! UWAAA!"

With her hair in a mess, Aisaka fervently tore open the envelope and shook it upside down. After she confirmed that there was indeed nothing inside, she turned around at looked at Ryūji with a blank expression,

"... I'm so hopeless..."

After saying that, she slowly sat down on the floor. Her eyes, which were still wide open to the point of cracking, slowly closed. Her thin lips quivered softly, while her chin made a clicking noise.

"Ai, Aisaka?"

A compulsory shutdown...

Sitting before Ryūji, her face became pale instantaneously and the tiny body that was wrapped up in the one-piece dress fell down sideways just like that in the living room of his two-room, one kitchen apartment.

"Hey! Aisaka! Are you alright?"

It all happened too suddenly, Ryūji quickly ran up and carried the unconscious doll in his arms.

At that moment...

Grumble~ Grumble~

"Was that... her stomach... grumbling?"

* * *

At the Takasu residence, there was always food ready at any time.

The garlic and ginger were all cut beforehand, while onions were available all the time. A few turnips were added and finally some bacon and eggs. Of course, in order to make sure there was never a lack of seasonings,

the kitchen always had plenty of chicken soup powder, spices, as well as chicken bone soup base.

A bit of castor oil was added to the one and a half cups worth of rice, adding in some chopped turnips to give it a clearer taste. The rice was coated yellow as egg was mixed in, so all that was left was to add in the onion to sweeten it and the bacon to complete it. After including some additives - bit of pepper, salt and some oyster sauce - the last thing to do was to decorate it with the saved up cilantro.

Together with the soup, which only required pouring hot water on top of some chopped onions and chicken soup base, the whole meal was complete in 15 minutes. There was even time to clean the dishes while the food cooked.

Though it was 3am, Ryūji's cooking was still flawless.

"G... garlic..."

Grumble~..... Ryūji could hear her sleep-talk within that ludicrous grumble. He wondered if he should give her a push...

"...Ai, Aisaka Taiga, wake up! If you want garlic, it's here, with castor oil on top as well."

Ryūji softly shook the little figure that was sleeping on the bed.

"Fried... fried..."

"Yes, it's fried rice!"

"Fried... rice..."

Drool began to drip down the edge of her pale lips. *Since I saw it, I can't just leave it like that.* Ryūji thought as he couldn't help but softly wipe her mouth with a tissue.

"Get up, or your rice is gonna get cold!"

Aisaka's eyelashes shuddered for a bit. To avoid touching her, Ryūji tugged her down from the mattress by pulling on her dress. Aisaka even twitched a bit halfway as she reluctantly sat up.

"... Ah... Eh?"

Looks like she's up. She gave a scowl and shoved Ryūji's hand away, while suspiciously removing the wet towel from her forehead. Slightly moving her nose, she said,

"... What's that? That smell... it smells like garlic..."

Her eyes rolled all over looking around.

"Didn't I just say it's fried rice? Hurry up and eat, this'll get your blood glucose level up! Otherwise you're gonna faint again."

Ryūji pointed at the plate of fried rice placed on the short table. *AH!* Her eyes glittered for a moment, but...

"...Just what are you plotting...?"

She quickly squinted her eyes and scowled, staring straight through to Ryūji, who was now in his track suit.

"Why would I want to plot anything? I guess the only thing around that can wake you up is that fried rice, isn't it? Your stomach was grumbling quite loudly, you know ? You had the same anemic symptoms at school as well... Hey, don't tell me you never eat at all?"

"That's none of your business! Leave me alone! ... This apartment, do you live here alone?"

"Well, there's my mom, though she's out working. And when trying to assault someone, at least get an idea of who's inside! If it were someone else, they would've called the cops already."

"Ah, shut up... You, you didn't do anything funny to me, did you?"

Aisaka looked sternly while shielding her body with both her arms, her eyes squinting to a small line while examining Ryūji in a very provocative way. *You're the one that's funny around here!* Ryūji forced himself to swallow what he was about to say.

"... You're least qualified to say such things, when you were the one who intruded into another person's apartment to ambush him, but fainted because of starvation! Alright, hurry up and eat!"

Despite all this, it was still three in the morning and it certainly wasn't the time to argue and disturb the neighbors.

"I don't... mmmmm!"

Ryūji scooped a large spoonful of fried rice and forcefully stuffed it into Aisaka's mouth while she was still rambling away on his bed. This required a certain amount of courage, but Ryūji had already consigned himself to his fate, so he figured he might as well face whatever comes his way. For a while he certainly felt manly.

"W, what are you doing!?"

Aisaka pushed the spoon away while her eyes glittered, but it didn't seem like she intended to spit out what was in her mouth. Her little face chewed on the food nonstop, looking very much like a squirrel.

"Mmm... mmm, d, don't think you can get away with this..."

Gulp. She swallowed the food.

"...I'm not yet done with you!"

She snatched the spoon which she had pushed away a minute ago from Ryūji's hand and continued,

"Most importantly, how did you know the envelope was empty?"

She picked up her long dress as she slowly got out of bed,

"You must have taken a peek inside and opened it, right!? You are the worst! You voyeuristic pervert!"

Hmph! She turned her back towards Ryūji and sat before the short table.

"... No, it isn't like that! I... well... I saw it through the lighting."

Though it wasn't entirely correct, Ryūji had to settle for that answer, though he wasn't sure whether she was even listening. Sitting in front of the table, she flattened the tiny hill of rice using her spoon and then in a strangely intense atmosphere, slowly brought the rice towards her little mouth.

Munch, munch, munch, munch, gulp. She then sipped a spoonful of soup. *Ah...* And then released a sigh of relief before sipping another spoon. Facing Aisaka, Ryūji brought up the issue he was thinking about while cooking,

"Hey, Aisaka, listen to me. It's like this..."

Munch munch munch munch

"Your letter... I mean that envelope, there's nothing to be ashamed of, even if I saw what was inside..."

Munch munch munch munch munch munch munch, chew! Crunch!

"I think..."

Chomp chomp chomp chomp chomp chomp chomp chomp chomp chomp!

"Hey, listen to me!"

"Seconds!"

"Okay."

Good thing I made extra... Ryūji muttered to himself, scooping all the rice from the frying pan into the bowl and returning it Aisaka.

"Like I said... listen to me already!"

She doesn't seem to be listening. Is this what you call undivided attention? Just where does all the food go in that tiny body of hers? Aisaka focused on nothing else but fried rice, fried rice, and still fried rice... This was her personal Fried Rice Festival.

This is going nowhere and the fried rice's gonna run out soon. Ryūji decided to stand up and bring the birdcage from the corner of the living room over.

"Hey Aisaka, come and have a look at this... it's tasty!"

"Something tasty?"

Now that he had her attention... *Whoosh!* Ryūji removed the cloth on the birdcage and showed her its contents.

"WAH!!!"

"Well? He looks disgusting, doesn't he?"

Past experiments had shown that only an earthquake of magnitude 4 or above could wake up Inko-chan... A spasmodic face, rolling white eyes, a wide open beak,

and his weird tongue sticking out... The ugly sleeping face quickly worked its wonders and Aisaka bounced backwards.

"That's disgusting! Why'd you show me something like that!?"

Apparently she could finally hear what Ryūji was saying.

"... Sorry about that Inko-chan, so go back to sleep... Anyway, Aisaka!"

After covering Inko-chan with the cloth, Ryūji sat directly opposite from Aisaka, who had finally returned to her senses. *What do you want!?* Her eyes read as she glared at Ryūji, though she still had the bowl in her arms as she continued with her Fried Rice Festival.

"Just eat and listen. What I want to say is... that there's nothing to be ashamed of. We're second year high school students, it's only natural for us to have one or two people of the opposite gender that we fancy, so there's nothing wrong with writing a love letter. Don't all the couples right now have to go through all these troubling things in order to get together?"

"..."

She chewed while covering her face with the bowl. She still appeared to be feeling embarrassed.

"But then again, who would really put their love letter into the wrong bag? ... Not to mention forgetting to place the letter inside the envelope."

Once Ryūji finished...

"It's all your fault!"

Slam! Aisaka suddenly pounded her fist on the table. She looked up and pointed the spoon at Ryūji,

"... You've been rambling on for quite some time now. Let me set things straight, I was still hesitating on whether to put that letter inside the bag when you appeared. I panicked and wanted to hide the letter, so I ended up putting it inside by mistake... I never thought that it would be your bag..."

"Hey, Aisaka... you've got some rice on your cheek."

"You. Are. Annoying."

"Ugh..."

Her eyes flashed terrifyingly like a sharp blade. Under a glare like that, Ryūji quickly shut up and stopped talking.

She now appeared to be fully recharged with her full stomach. *Hmph*, She proudly lifted her chin and locked on Ryūji with those killing eyes. The Palmtop Tiger, now fully re-energized and ready to kill, gave a low and savage growl.

"Takasu Ryūji... this wouldn't have happened if you had obediently handed over that bag... Now how should I punish you? How should I remove your memories! After doing something so embarrassing, how do you expect me to live on!?"

We're going in circles here. Ryūji clutched his head for a while, and then...

"Didn't I already say there's nothing to be ashamed of!? Look, you stay here and wait!"

Ryūji's decided to burn both ends of the candle.

Leaving the living room, he entered his room and came out carrying loads of stuff and placed them all before Aisaka. There were many notebooks and small notes, CDs, illustration books, a second hand MD player and more. *Since it's come to this, I'll show you everything. Everything.*

"What are these?"

"Just have a look at them. Feel free to pick anything up ."

Tch! Aisaka annoyingly grabbed the nearest notebook and gave it a flick. Her fingers then stopped as she scowled and looked at the notebook and Ryūji.

"Seriously, what's this? What are you doing?"

"That's a 'catalogue'. You probably don't know what that is. It's a playlist of concert songs I compiled for the girl that I like. I might as well tell you, the songs are arranged according to different seasons, so there's four themes in total. I even made MD recordings of those songs."

"And this is it." Ryūji then turned on his MD player and stuffed the earphones into a reluctant Aisaka's ears. From the faint music coming out from the earphones, Ryūji could tell that it was the first song for his summer concert.

"And this is a poem I wrote. At the time I was thinking 'What Christmas present should I give to her after we become a couple?" when writing it. Would perfume be fine? Sure, but it had to be Eau de Toilette! I've even got all the names of the perfume brands listed, I also took the trouble to find out the prices for each bottle of perfume and wrote them all down... How about that? That's the sort of stuff I used to do."

"That's disgusting!"

Aisaka pulled out the earphones and threw them back at Ryūji as though they were something dirty. Although he got hit by earphones, Ryūji did not back down,

"If it's disgusting, then so be it. But the reason I'm telling you is because I don't feel ashamed of it! What's wrong with liking a girl!? I'll admit I'm hopeless in not

having the courage to confess my feelings and only indulging in my fantasies, but I find nothing to be ashamed of!"

Well, maybe I am a bit ashamed, but since I've already said it... Just at that moment, Ryūji lost his balance as he turned around and the thing which he didn't want to show Aisaka now slid to her feet.

"Ah! Not that..."

"... What's this? An envelope?"

He tried desperately to grab the envelope back, but he was one step behind the pair of tiny hands and ended up grasping at air instead.

"From Takasu Ryūji... To Kushieda Minori-san... Kushieda Minori-san!!??"

"T, that's... no, w, wait, don't..."

"A love letter!? And... for Minorin!? You!? This as well!? And this!?"

There was no room for denial. Those three love letters were only written to make himself feel better, and were

not meant to be delivered. They were now all under the spotlight.

"Uwaa... you? Like Minorin... Eh!? ... You're joking!? Aren't you a bit full of yourself now..."

"Y, you're not any better, are you!? What's with that 'eh '!? Don't you have a crush on my pal Kitamura as well..."

"... S, shut up, didn't I tell you to forget about that? ... And instead of squirming about, hurry up and confess already!"

"I can say the same to you!"

"You want to bring your wooden blade? Or do you want to throw that away!?" "You want a piece of me? Or you want something even better?" After bickering with each other for a while...

"AH!"

Ryūji suddenly realized that with all the commotion, the sky outside the window had started to brighten... the sun was about to rise.

"Damn! It's four already!"

It's almost time for Yasuko to come home from work. *Things will get bothersome if Aisaka continues to stay here, as Yasuko will ask a lot of questions, and besides, I don't want anyone else to see Yasuko's face when she comes home, with her moaning "Ryū-chan, it's Ya-chan~, I'm thir~sty~, mmm" and all.*

Not to mention the landlady's gonna be up once the morning post arrives. She'll probably come up to complain about the noise we made first thing in the morning... No, she may already be up and just be waiting for the right time to come up. Ryūji instantly went pale at such a possibility. *Oh shit. If the landlady throws us out now, we won't have any money to find another place to live... Our savings were used up last month (selfishly by Yasuko) to buy a flat-screen TV that doesn't fit with the apartment...*

"A~nyway! I won't tell this to anyone and I don't see Aisaka as an idiot, since I'm hardly any better. So let's put an end to this, okay?"

"... No, I can't do that."

"Why!? For now just get the hell... I mean please go home for now...! My sick mom's about to come home..."

In a way, she is indeed quite sick, so he wasn't exactly lying, but...

"No! I don't trust you, besides... besides..."

Like a small kid, Aisaka kneeled down right in the middle of the living room. Staring at her knees, she twirled her fingers around the tatami and said,

"... Um, that... love letter, what should I do... I just don't feel it's time to deliver it yet..."

Great! Aisaka chooses now to ask me for tips on romance! "AHHH!" Ryūji clutched his head and said,

"I, I'll tell you about it some other day! C'mon, just go home for now... I beg you!"

"... Are you sure you're going to tell me about it then?"

"Yes! Definitely! I'll listen to anything you say, and I'll help out in anything you ask. I swear!"

"... You're going to help me? No matter what?"

"Yes! Anything, anything!"

"You'll help in anything? You said so... You'll help me like a dog? And do everything for me as my dog?"

"Yes, yes! I'll work hard like one, I swear! Whether as a dog or anything, I'll help! ... So, let's end this today, okay ? Okay?"

"Okay... Then I'll go home."

She finally seemed to accept. Aisaka picked up her wooden blade and got up. She took a glance towards the window, there was a pair of small shoes thrown beside its base. *So she did crawl in through there...* Aisaka turned to glance at Ryūji who was muttering, then picked up her shoes and headed for the entrance. Suddenly she turned around,

"Hey!"

What is it now!? Ryūji made a defensive stance, but...

"Is there anymore... fried rice?"

"Huh? Oh, no... cause you ate it all."

"That so? Ah well."

"You're still not full? That was four bowls worth of rice . Are you really that hungry?"

There was no reply. Aisaka turned her back towards Ryūji and put on one shoe.

"... The fusuma..."

She said quietly and turned around without warning again.

"Man, you sure talk a lot."

"There's a hole in the fusuma... is fixing that going to cost a lot?"

She asked while looking up at Ryūji, her large eyes blinking two to three times. Feeling his heartbeat going wild, Ryūji avoided Aisaka's eyes. Not because he was afraid, but because he was puzzled. This was the first time he'd ever seen Aisaka not looking angry.

"Ahh... um... if it's fixing that, I can handle it myself... I think. I just had a look, the hole isn't that big, so it'll be fine if I have some good quality washi. Though you can only find normal quality washi paper in these parts."

"Hmm..."

He couldn't tell what she's up to with that expressionless face.

"Washi... If possible, you can use this!"

Aisaka stuck something out. *She wants me to use this? ...* Ryūji looked confused at the thing that she stuffed into his hand. *How should I put this? Asking me to fill the hole in the fusuma using her letterless love letter envelope...*

"If you find that useful, then use it! If you need money to fix it, I'll pay for it."

"Ah... er... um!"

Without answering whether she was full or not, Aisaka began to tie her shoelaces with a scowl. Looking at that round back of hers, he just felt...

"... Hey, wait a moment!"

He just felt he had to call her.

"What now?!"

"... How long have you not eaten?"

"Why do you care? It's not like I don't eat... I got tired with the stuff from the convenience store... so even after buying them I couldn't bring myself to eat..."

"Convenience store? All three meals? Wouldn't that be bad for your health?"

"There was a fast food stall in front of the station, but it closed down last month. So I could only get food from the convenience store... the cooked food in the supermarket... how do I put it... I don't know how to buy it..."

"You don't know how to buy it? Just pick what you like and put it into a transparent box, and then take it to the cashier to weigh it and that's it... By the way, where're your parents?"

After tying her shoelaces, Aisaka stood up. Ryūji saw her shake her head ambiguously. *Oh dear. Every family has their secrets, especially the seemingly enigmatic Aisaka family. Even if something unimaginable had happened within that family, there was nothing to be astonished about. I came from quite a tough family background myself, but I got on well with it, so how could I have come up with such an inconsiderate*

question? Feeling embarrassed, Ryūji did not ask further and simply stood and watched the figure with long hair open the door and walk out.

"Ah, wait! Let me walk you home! It's a bit dangerous to walk alone at this time of day..."

"Relax, I live closeby... Besides, I have a wooden blade. "

"No, wouldn't that be even more dangerous?"

"It's really close! Anyway, bye, Ryūji, see you tomorrow."

She turned and ran off. Ryūji quickly put on his slippers and without even locking his door, tried to give chase. Yet from his entrance looking downstairs, Aisaka was nowhere to be seen... *She sure possesses some extraordinary speed in her legs.*

"... In the end I let her go back alone. By the way..."

Did she just call me by my first name?

Ryūji blinked and looked with a screwed up face in the direction that Aisaka had disappeared into... He wasn't angry, just feeling very confused.

Before sunrise, just before Yasuko returned, Ryūji had already tidied his room up. This was thanks to his habit of tidying things up.

From that day onwards, on the fusuma in the Takasu residence was attached a small pattern of light pink cherry blossom petals.

Chapter 3

The commotion at sunrise went by like a dream and the silent morning returned to the Takasu residence.

It was already 5 am when Ryūji returned to his bed after being ambushed by the Palmtop Tiger. For a body that was still growing, it could be a pain not having enough sleep. Yawning with his mouth open wide, he roused himself and woke up at the same time as usual. There were still a lot of things to be done...

After going to the bathroom, he had to feed Inko-chan. As always, he made sure that the parrot was fully awake before removing the cloth on the cage. But...

"Morning, Inko-ch... Whoa!"

Inko-chan laid dead with his face up.

"B, but didn't you just reply just now!? Inko-chan!"

"... Ugh... ugh... ugh..."

... Nope, he was still alive. He was just lying flat at the bottom of the cage, anyone would have thought he was dead at first glance, but it looked like he was just lying

there. After Ryūji yelled, he quickly stood up. For some reason his feathers looked ruffled, it was as though he felt very uncomfortable.

"I don't know what on earth you're thinking already!"

"Morning!"

Maybe it would be better if I had owned a cat or a dog, or something that can communicate telepathically with humans. Ryūji thought while replacing Inko-chan's food tray.

"...I...iii...I...In...In...In..."

Inko-chan looked straight into Ryūji's eyes, trying hard to think what it was that he wanted to say. Could it be the thing that Ryūji had been teaching him for years, but which still struggled to say?

"Could it be... you're finally going to say "Inko-chan"? Have you finally got it!?"

Ryūji looked excitedly into the birdcage. Before him, Inko-chan cheekily opened the feathers on his tail, and then...

"I...Idiot!"

"Damn it!"

Flap! Without thinking, Ryūji covered the cage with the cloth again. Though he may look intimidating, he was actually quite even-tempered. All hell would break loose if he were to get annoyed at every little thing. With the calm temperament of a gentleman, he went to have a look at Yasuko, who should have already gone to sleep. He opened the fusuma...

She should be sleeping, right? As he had heard the door open, Ryūji knew she had returned.

"... She came back, but this is ridiculous..."

He muttered and shut his eyes.

Yasuko was so drunk that the whole house reeked of booze when she fell asleep. But why did she have to sleep as though she had rolled forward and landed upside down? She now slept with her bottom facing upwards. Good thing she changed into her track suit; even if she was his mother... No, it was because she was his mother that he had to be strict to her. According to her son's standards, recklessly showing off her underwear was a strict no-no. It looked like she fell

asleep half-way through removing her make-up. Though half of her face was now clean, the other half was still full of make-up, making her look exactly like Baron Ashura. Not to mention she looked quite uncomfortable.

According to Ryūji's deductions, Yasuko was originally sitting by the small table next to her futon and removing her makeup, but she grew tired and fell asleep with her face flat on the futon.

"I'm amazed you didn't break your neck... Hey, sleep properly! You'll die if you keep sleeping like that!"

"...Ya...Yaya...Umm...umm...Ya..."

She spoke in exactly the same manner as Inko-chan.

Wondering about the hidden connection between Yasuko and Inko-chan (mainly their intelligence), Ryūji carefully placed Yasuko in a proper sleeping position on her futon. Yasuko had been wanting to get her own bed. *But with such a horrid sleeping face, like hell I'll ever buy you one!*

From the convenience store bag at the corner of the room he removed two melting ice-cream sticks and quietly left the room, shutting the fusuma behind him.

First, he would have to quickly place these melting ice-cream into the fridge.

Next, he would have to prepare breakfast and lunch bentos. Looking inside the fridge...

"Ah, yeah, I remember..."

Ryūji squinted his fierce eyes, not out of anger, but out of disappointment.

The Fried Rice Festival had used up all the eggs and bacon, so there went the bacon and egg breakfast. The refrigerated rice was also used up.

"... Looks like milk will have to do for breakfast; as for the bentos... it'll have to be simple today. For side dishes we've only got potatoes left."

Rice was essential, no matter what, so Ryūji decided to make some simple creole rice and salted potatoes.

After washing the rice, he made sure he added enough rice wine, some syrup and mirin, some cut-up kombu, boiled bamboo shoots and enokitakes into the rice pot.

After adding a suitable amount of water, he turned on the rice cooker and that was it, all that was left was for it to cook.

Next, Ryūji skillfully peeled off the potato skins at an incredible pace, placing the potatoes in a pot and simmering them until there was little water left. While he was at it, he washed the chopping board, cooking knife and cleared off the mess from the marble kitchen table. Once the boiling water in the pot had decreased and the potatoes began to emerge, he added some refined sugar, mirin, rice wine, syrup, soup powder and some noodle sauce. All that was left was to wait for everything to cook and that was it. Afterwards, he would have to switch to a smaller flame to avoid overcooking and then let it simmer till just before it was time to leave. Finally, he would spice things up with a little soy sauce. Ryūji had never really checked how it was actually done, but so far just cooking it this way was already tasty enough for him .

It was just over half an hour since he woke up, so there was still plenty of time. Ryūji poured all the milk into a glass, then turned on the TV and sat on the sofa.

Watching the morning gossip programs to kill the brief breakfast time, he listened intently to yesterday's soccer news while wiping the table. Without knowing it, Ryūji had the short table wiped sparkling clean.

After hearing that his team had won, leaving aside the fact that he only had milk for breakfast, Ryūji felt it was quite a good start to the morning. Though, it would be even better if the sun were to shine in brightly through the window like last year. Looking out the window, Ryūji sighed inside his dim room. At that moment...

"...Whoa!"

The phone suddenly rang. To call at a time like this, could it be some relative? Deciding not to let Yasuko be disturbed in her sleep (since she was still the master of the house, after all), Ryūji rushed to pick up the phone.

"Hello, this is Takasu speaking..."

"You're late! Just what were you doing!?"

"..."

He hung up without even thinking.

What was I doing? Living a normal life, of course. The sudden berating caused Ryūji's mind to go blank for a moment. The phone rang again, Ryūji politely answered,

"Hello, this is Takasu speaking..."

"You just hung up on me, didn't you? Would you like me to come over right now to your place and raise hell?"

That would be bothersome. Ryūji quickly thought out the answer. Although the landlady didn't come to complain, Ryūji could hear her sweeping the floor loudly outside for a while now. She was, no doubt, waiting for Ryūji to come out and tell him off there and then. It seems the Takasus had been black listed.

To be able to talk in such a gangster-like way, there was only one person he could think of...

"Aisaka... Taiga..."

She possessed a gangster-like alias, the Palmtop Tiger.

"If you find it bothersome then hurry up and come over! What were you doing? Don't tell me you're breaking your promise already? Do you even know what's going on?"

"Promise? You can't be serious?"

"Didn't you say you would do anything like a dog? You swore, didn't you? So hurry up and come over! Now ! Everyday before school from now on!"

"...W, wait! The thing we talked last night, you mean that right? When I said I'll help you, I mean helping you get close to Kitamura so you could talk to him more... That's what I swore!"

"Tch!"

The phone gave a very annoyed and irritated clicking sound of the tongue.

"You were the one that said you'll do anything! I don't care, just hurry up and come! You know I mean what I say when I say I'm going to do that... as to what 'that' means, you should know already."

It seemed like Aisaka was really in a bad mood. Her voice sounded just like wailing demons from hell, which vibrated the phone receiver in an ominous way and caused Ryūji's ears to shake. There was no point arguing further with her on the phone if it had come to this.

"... A, anyway, no matter what... I will come over... but. .. I don't even know where you live."

"Just look outside of your window."

"Huh? Outside my window? There's nothing outside besides... WHOA!?"

Carrying the phone receiver past the ridiculously narrow living room and looking out through the dim window, Ryūji could see the Bourgeoisie-style apartment block. Yet on the second floor of that building... looking straight across from the window opposite...

"What's with those silly-looking pajamas?"

Aisaka Taiga was standing there holding a trendy phone in her hand while looking disgruntled.

"Ah! S, stop looking at me!"

Wearing Yasuko's "cuddly woolen shirt" (with heart shapes all over) since he was feeling cold, Ryūji quickly covered his shirt with his hands while looking fierce. He wasn't feeling angry, but embarrassed.

Aisaka indignantly pulled her expensive curtains up.

"Like hell I want to look at you! Hurry up and get your ass over, you stupid dog!"

Aisaka ended with this sentence, but Ryūji remembered he still had things to do,

"Wait! Just give me ten more minutes!"

"... Why?"

"Because the creole rice bento is not cooked yet."

"..."

From the silence on the other end, Ryūji could faintly hear a thunderous growling of the stomach. It was just too loud to be ignored.

"...W, would you like to have some?"

After a long silence, the curtains on the window of that Bourgeoisie-style apartment opened about 10cm. Aisaka remained silent while nodding at Ryūji.

Yasuko, Inko-chan, and now Aisaka.

Looks like there were now three instead of two waiting to be fed by Ryūji.

* * *

This was the first time he had ever seen an automatic gate.

The atmosphere in the marble-laden entrance felt colder than the air outside. The surrounding area was eerily quiet, as though keeping a watch on Ryūji. Facing such an unfitting ambiance, Ryūji's eyes couldn't help looking more fierce as a result of staring at the device that was before him. At his waist level was a marble panel with a button, a keyhole and something like an intercom. At the other end was the automatic gate that led to the interior of the apartment block. Yet the gate did not open automatically. On his right was the security

booth, but there was a sign outside that read "Cleaning in Progress", so it seemed like there was no one inside. *Just how do you use this device? How am I supposed to get into the Palmtop Tiger's cage?* Ryūji remained silent while at a loss as to what to do when...

"Good... morning...?"

A young woman emerged from the gate and greeted Ryūji, but quickly glanced suspiciously at him, wondering *Who on earth is this person?*

"M, morning."

Lowering his head embarrassingly, Ryūji slotted himself through the gate before it shut. *Is it really okay for me to enter like this?* he wondered, though he believed it wouldn't get him into too much trouble.

He entered the elevator and pushed the button for the second floor. As the doors reopened, he found himself looking at a carpet-laden corridor that he had seen before in the hotel of one of his previous field trips.

This got Ryūji wondering, just how much was the rent here? *...Shoot, I forgot to ask what her room number is.* Though that problem was quickly solved...

Because there was only one door at the end of the corridor... In other words, the entire second floor of this Bourgeoisie-style apartment building was the Aisaka residence.

"She sure is rich... Could the rumour that her father's a gangster actually be true?"

While in deep thought, Ryūji walked nervously towards the door (since even though it was Aisaka, he was still visiting a girl's place), and pushed the doorbell. However, there was no response, even after pushing several times.

There's still some time till school begins, but my time is not unlimited! He timidly attempted to push the door open.

He held his breath and then... the door opened.

"... M, morning! ... Aisaka! ... It's me, Takasu... Hello?"

He peeked in and yelled, still there was no response. *Hello~! Hello~!* Ryūji entered the apartment entrance as he continued yelling.

"... Sorry to bother... M, may I come in? Is that okay?"

Some balls she has, calling me over in a threatening way and then leaving me to stand here all alone! What am I supposed to do if her family sees me? Especially her dad! Ryūji removed his shoes anxiously and walked along the wooden corridor in his socks.

Ryūji sighed as he walked and looked around. Whether it was the white wallpaper, the premium wooden tiles or the uplighting, everything reflected a sense of fine taste, unlike other rented apartments around the neighborhood. In fact, for someone with much interest in interior designing, Ryūji looked with great interest at the laminated glass door as he opened it. And then...

"Wow! ... Whoa!!!"

First, he gazed in amazement, then he got struck by a very foul smell.

What amazed him was the living room, which was at least the size of 20 tatami-mats. It was laid with a pure white carpet and there was a light gray sofa, coupled with a pure white dining table and designer chairs... Facing south was a window where one could see the view that the Takasus used to see a year ago - the trees in

the park nearby. The deep colored kitchenware did not affect the living room's sense of width in any way and the customized design had a posh feeling to it. This was coupled with the trendy and beautiful crystal chandelier above. What seemed strange was that there were only enough sofas and chairs for one person.

Normally, it wouldn't be strange to see five or six chairs for such a spacious living room.

And then there was the foul smell...

"Is it coming from over here...?"

It came from the beautiful European-style kitchen.

The kitchen had a large stainless steel sink, but it had been stuffed with a whole pile of dirty plates for an undetermined amount of time. *Then what would the drain look like?* Just thinking about it was enough to give one goosebumps. Not to mention part of the stainless steel looked misty, as it was full of...

"AAARRRGGGHHH!!!"

Black mold, enough to torment a person till he fainted. As if pulled by it, Ryūji staggered towards the surface

and rubbed his trembling finger over it. Needless to say, it felt slippery and thick...

Unacceptable!!!

I cannot allow this to happen! This is a desecration of the kitchen! A desecration to life! Even though the kitchen in my small apartment is narrow and dark, at least it's clean enough for one to lick it without getting ill. Some people work their asses off trying to keep their kitchen clean, and then there are people who have such a beautiful and well-equipped kitchen, and, and, and, turn it into... THIS!!!

"AISAKA~!!!"

Ryūji bolted out of the kitchen. *I've seen enough! How dare she let me see such a thing!*

"No matter what, let me... let me clean your kitchen!!!"

Something had gone off within Ryūji's heart.

His nerves showing, he ran around the living room like a bullet, but still could not find Aisaka. His eyes, glittering in excitement, noticed a sliding door.

"Is it this one!?"

He then pulled it open with great force...

"...Ah."

... Bingo. But somehow, it felt as though... he guessed wrongly.

Aisaka Taiga was there.

Facing a sight like that, Ryūji couldn't help but cover his mouth, he even stopped breathing.

The curtains hung from the north-facing window, in the silent room with a high ceiling, lying everywhere on the pure white carpet were fluffy one-piece dresses that were thrown randomly after being taken off. In the corner was a matching pure white studying table and chair, while in the middle of the room was a princess-sized bed with white lacy curtains hanging from above.

This was Aisaka's room.

At the center of the bed, surrounded by the lacy curtains, lay Aisaka Taiga. Her long hair was spread all over the bedspread, while she cuddled her arms and legs as she slept silently.

The portable phone receiver was placed next to the pillow and beyond the curtains one could just see the Takasu residence.

"... So she went back to sleep..."

Zzzzz... Only the silent and rhythmic breathing could be heard.

Unable to approach her, Ryūji maintained this distance while looking at the sleeping Aisaka... It's not like he really wanted to look, it was just that he could not get her out of his field of vision.

Wrapped in her loose pajamas, her tiny arms and legs now looked even tinier. It was only at this moment that her calm face looked as clear as an ice sculpture, as though it was about to melt. Her small nose, slightly open little mouth, and her eyelashes extending downwards... if it weren't for her breathing, one couldn't tell whether she was alive or not... And there Aisaka slept quietly on her bed.

It wasn't because he was watching his classmate sleeping, it was just that this scenery felt like it came straight out of a fairy tale.

Ryūji felt that she looked just like Sleeping Beauty, just like any other girl. But he quickly rejected that sort of thinking.

... She's no princess.

Nope... she was just a doll that had been forgotten by a princess. Her eyes would open once you pick her up, but since she was forgotten, she could only lie there and keep on sleeping.

The doll slept in this bed, in this room, in this apartment, and yet they belonged to the princess and not the doll. This explained why everything seemed so big in comparison to the doll's size.

Yet Aisaka is a human and this is Aisaka's home... Speaking of which, where is her family?

After looking around the room, Ryūji quietly squinted his eyes. *One chair, one sofa... There's no one here besides Aisaka, and here sleeps Aisaka, who merely shakes her head when being asked about her family.*

Ryūji looked at his watch, there was still time before school would begin.

Feeling that it would be quite hard to wake her, Ryūji silently left the room and closed the door without making a sound. *I'll call her if she's still not up just before it's time to leave.*

After returning from the alternate dimension in the silent bedroom, Ryūji slowly took off his gakuran jacket and rolled up his sleeves.

"... Let's do this!"

Before his glaring eyes was the extremely slippery utility kitchen, the time limit was 15 minutes. The battle between the man and the dirty stainless steel had begun.

When Aisaka Taiga wakes up, she probably won't believe her eyes.

Though his work was not yet complete... *I'll finish the rest tomorrow!* Ryūji swore to himself, the kitchen utensils and the stainless steel cupboard behind him, which was left untidied for nearly half a year, were now sparkling clean.

All that was left was the creole rice and instant miso soup breakfast.

The contents were the same. *Though I brought extra.* Ryūji remarked on the tightly packed and heavy bento.

All of these were made for Aisaka Taiga, who was still sleeping in her sweet dreams.

* * *

"I specifically called you to pick me up, because I didn't want to be late, why'd you leave it till this late? Just what have you been doing?"

"Wha!? Didn't I tell you to eat faster many times? Just who was it that kept asking for seconds and refusing to put down the bowl?"

"I never asked you to help me, you were the one who happily made the breakfast on your own. I thought it'd be a waste if I didn't eat it, so I was actually helping you! You ought to be grateful for my generosity!"

"Gimme back...! Gimme back that bento!"

"Shut up already! And stay away from me, you perverted dog!"

"Why you... Gimme that! I'll have you return that! Along with my kindness!"

"Shut up, you scum!"

"I, I don't have any spare creole rice for people that call me scum!"

Running shoulder to shoulder along the road to school , Ryūji and Aisaka had begun a dangerous sparring war. Under the green leaves of the trees planted alongside, there was no one else that could have created more trouble for others besides these two fighting on the road.

Ryūji attacked from the above, trying to snatch away the bento bag that Aisaka was carrying in her tiny hands;

though Aisaka skillfully dodged him using her small body and slithered around like a snake, keeping her distance from Ryūji. Some innocent bystanders, not wanting to have anything to do with an evil looking high school student with a terrifying glare and a pretty girl with an innocent face, all avoided making eye contact with them.

"How can such an ungrateful girl like you exist... this is unbelievable! And after I cleaned your kitchen for you, though it's still not completely clean..."

"I already said I never asked you to do it!"

"You! Let me get this straight, you're completely ridiculous! The stagnant water clogged up in the sink was already reeking... There was nothing but slime and mold in the drain, and the rotting leftovers were an image straight from hell... Just how long have you left it unattended? The apartment stank like hell!"

"For about half a year."

"You really have no right to call yourself a human being..."

Ryūji pointed at her with his finger, while Aisaka merely replied without any expression, "What's that got to do with me?" and quickly walked ahead. He didn't clean the kitchen because he wanted to obey her commands. Ryūji just couldn't bear to see a kitchen being left in such a messy state. He wanted to make it clean, make it beautiful, make it usable... Those thoughts slowly grew in his mind and became unstoppable.

"Am I... being pathetic?"

Ryūji muttered to himself while chasing after Aisaka. Or to be precise, because he too had to go to school, he had no choice but to walk behind her. Aisaka turned her head slightly to look at Ryūji,

"Never mind the little stuff. Don't forget that you'll have to help me at school, so don't try to run away!"

Aisaka exclaimed, looking at Ryūji with her completely awakened eyes while snorting silently with her tiny nose. *Is this what they call a forewarning?* Ryūji hastened his footsteps and replied,

"I'll say this, I have no intention of helping someone who speaks to me in such a manner!"

Without warning, Ryūji bumped straight into Aisaka, who had stopped suddenly, and elbowed him in the stomach.

"Y, you idiot! Don't stop all of a sudden!"

Feeling pissed off, Ryūji bemoaned at the blatant disregard for his own life, but Aisaka's eyes were not looking at Ryūji at all.

"Minorin! Were you waiting for me again?"

"You're late, Taiga! Did you take a detour today as well?"

"...Uh!"

Just before he was about to trip, Ryūji caught himself. In front of Aisaka, standing at the corner of a major road-junction was none other than Kushieda Minori.

Only a small part of her face was tanned by the sun, coupled with her smooth and large eyes, she smiled innocently while waving in their direction. Her hair was illuminated by the shine of the morning sun, while her skirt fluttered in the wind... Yet her arm suddenly

stopped waving and her smile disappeared, instead she widened her large eyes...

"EEEHHH~...!!!??? Wha...!? No way! Could it be!?"

"What is it, Minorin?"

"M, my ears..."

Minori yelled in a very sharp voice, while turning her glance quickly at both Ryūji and Taiga who were both going to school together.

"And you ask me what it is!? Eh, eh... I, I see... I didn't even know, that Taiga and Takasu-kun would get along so well as to come to school as a couple..."

"You've got it wrong, Minorin. Besides, what do you mean by 'as a couple'?"

"Hmm...! W, what was it called again? Um, in this kind of situation... Argh! I can't find the right word to describe it! Oh yeah, you two have 'sworn to never part'?!"

"No, no, no! We didn't swear to walk together to school! I, it's just that, we only met over there!"

Ryūji instinctively came up with an excuse like that, he then turned and said gently,

"Am I right, Aisaka?"

As she turned her head, she revealed a very ghastly gentle smile.

"What, so you two only met by chance, huh?"

"Yeah, we live very near to each other."

Aisaka began to walk shoulder to shoulder with her good friend Minori. *How can I let such a good chance slip by !?* Ryūji quickly caught up from behind while quickly beginning to think with his head.

Could it be that since Aisaka knows that I like Minori, she called me out in order to create a chance for me to go to school with her?

"Well then, see you later, Takasu-kun... I had wanted to say let's head to the classroom together! But it seems like you don't want to walk with us, right? Since we only just met by chance, right?"

In less than 3 seconds, Ryūji's imagination was swiftly crushed by Aisaka, who turned her head around.

"... Ah... No, Ai, Aisaka..."

"Then, I'll see you later then, Takasu-kun! Hey Taiga, did you see last night's TV..."

What just happened? But I also watched TV last night... ... Vainly trying to call them back with his arm stretched out, Ryūji received his final warning:

Don't you ever think of trying to get ahead of me! Stop being cocky, you stupid dog!

"... Ugh..."

Aisaka seemed to be saying that as she turned her head once again and glared with that gloomy and heavy stare.

Ryūji was petrified by the eyes of the beast small enough to be placed on anyone's palm. She seemed to be declaring *Unless you can get me to get along with Kitamura-kun, I'll do everything to stop you from getting near Minorin!*

Even without her in the way, it was still only a dream for him to go out with Minori... *Now why am I thinking about such sad things all of a sudden?*

No! At this rate I'll end up as Aisaka's dog for the rest of my life. That was the worst possible outcome he could ever imagine...

Watching the slowly disappearing figures of the two girls, Ryūji squinted his eyes earnestly. *Bring it on! Don't you underestimate me!* For the first time, contempt and degradation had gotten Ryūji's fighting spirit fired up.

By getting Aisaka to get along with Kitamura, won't that mean I'll be able to close my distance with Minori!?

Chapter 4

The plan was simple...

There was to be a basketball match for that day's PE lesson. The boys and girls would be split into two and play amongst their own gender, but they would warm up together before that... With two people paired off together for the warm-up, which would then take about 10 minutes and would involve stretching and passing balls.

The students were free to choose their warm-up partner however they wished, the PE teacher wouldn't mind as long as they were all paired up.

"... Which is why, this is a good opportunity for two people who rarely speak to have a conversation. I think it's great! So you go team up with Kitamura! End of story ."

Ryūji explained his strategy while heading towards the gymnasium, dressed in his PE uniform. Walking beside him was Aisaka, who toyed with her ponytail that she tied behind while moping,

"Team up with him... But who in the class would go and pair up with the opposite gender? I always team up with Minorin, and Kitamura-kun is always with you. Now you suddenly ask me to team up with him... I just can't do it!"

She got quieter as she finished off her sentence. *Tut, tut , tut!* Ryūji waved his finger while proudly explaining his strategy,

"That's the whole point. Now listen up! The aim is to naturally and casually team up with him, all we need is some preparation. First, I'll team up with Aisaka..."

Aisaka looked suspiciously at Ryūji's face,

"... And then?"

"Once that happens, Kitamura will have no choice but to team up with someone else. Along the way, the guy who gets paired with Kitamura will be 'accidentally' hit by a ball thrown by me. Though it won't hurt him, it will be enough to cause a commotion, since I'll have to take that guy to the school clinic. In that case, guess who'll be left behind?"

"... Me, and Kitamura-kun?"

"Right? This way you can go and say 'Looks like we have no choice but to team up with each other'..."

"You really are a terrible actor. Are you taking me for a fool? ...And are things really gonna run that smoothly?"

"I'll do my best to make it run smoothly!"

The two of them changed into their sneakers while sitting shoulder to shoulder, and then gathered with other classmates before the PE teacher.

"Today... we'll practice passing the ball with a match." The teacher explained.

"Now then, let's begin with warm ups! Everyone pair up!"

"Hey, Aisaka!"

"I'm here! Let's team up, Takasu-kun!"

"Okay! Let's go!"

"... Right, dismissed! We seem to have some fired up spirits today!"

Ryūji and Aisaka quickly walked away from the gathering towards the corner of the gymnasium after quickly teaming up with each other. "Incredible... That Takasu really doesn't value his life anymore..." "It's as though he's now the Palmtop Tiger's pet..." Though everyone began to mutter amongst themselves fearfully, it did not reach the ears of those two. Facing each other, they consulted discreetly,

"We've now passed the first stage without any problems."

"Yeah."

Both nodded and exchanged glances.

However, Ryūji and Aisaka's sudden movement led the class towards an intriguing direction. Aside from the really shy ones, the other classmates also began to move...

"Hmm... so today's such a day, huh? Alright, I'll team up with a girl today! Who wants to be with me!?"

Starting with this flirtatious voice.

"Me too! I wanna team up with a guy!"

"You're right, I guess it's fine this way as well."

"Who knows? This could be fun!"

The mood became excited, aside from those who stuck with their oaths to team up with their friends, the others with less integrity began to team up with the opposite gender.

In the end...

"Maru~o-kun! Oops, I mean Kitamura-kun! Team up with me!"

"Huh? Ahh, sure, since I got dumped by Takasu..."

AH! Ryūji could hear a yell as he got smacked on the back by Aisaka.

"W, wait, what's going on!? Kitamura-kun's now teamed up with that weird girl!"

The one being called weird was one of the most popular girls in the class, Kihara Maya - Quite an elastic body for a 17 year old - She had extensions applied to her long eyelashes, while her lips were covered in a layer of thin semi-translucent pink lipstick. Wearing light makeup which only just made it past the school rules, she looked kind of cute... That's what Ryūji thought anyway.

"What do you mean weird girl? That's Kihara-san. Don't go calling your classmates that! Though things didn't go according to... WHA!?"

This time it was Ryūji's turn to yell.

"Kushieda, let's team up."

The one speaking in a coy manner was Noto Hisamitsu, a former Class 1-A classmate with whom Ryūji got along well - A fresh 17 year old - though the recently popular black framed glasses which he wore didn't suit him at all. *The hell's he doing, that bastard!?* As Ryūji glared with his pissed-off eyes...

"Okay! Let's go!"

Minori leaped happily towards Noto.

"Wha!? You!? Ehh!? Kushieda-san! Are you teaming up with that weird guy!? T, together!?"

"I thought he was your friend? Really, that's why I said you are a useless dog! How can you not have foreseen such a thing?"

"Weren't you the one who agreed to it!?"

Just as the two tried to shove blame onto each other, the PE teacher's whistle echoed across the gymnasium. Everyone lined up accordingly and started to do their warm-ups.

Standing ruefully before Ryūji, Aisaka started to move her body, shaking her ponytail as she went. The guys nearby who were close to her were repelled by her glare and clicking tongue, forcing the poor souls to quickly apologize and make a path for her to cross.

No matter who it was (besides Minorin), anyone who gets in her way would get bitten. Thus the alias, the Palmtop Tiger, which is derived from her name. Ryūji remembered what one of his new classmates said when inquiring about Aisaka's alias. There was indeed a reason she was called

a tiger, and unlike other girls, she didn't seemed too concerned about what Kitamura might think about her.

Yet, looking at the girl warming up to the music from the radio, her small and thin figure, she just didn't seem like a girl to be associated with the word "savagery". The uninitiated would probably think of her as a fragile-looking pretty girl. Indeed, when she first entered this school, there were many who regarded her as one of the prettiest amongst the new students, and it was said that they queued up just to confess to her... Ryūji could definitely understand how they felt.

Compared to other girls, she was one size smaller. A PE uniform that would just fit for others, would look much larger on her, and because of that she had to roll up the bottom part. Even her buttocks were as small as a child's. Overall, she belonged to the diminutive type.

Frankly speaking, even though he was tormented by her up until now, Ryūji still thought Aisaka was "quite cute", though even that was only limited to her looks. This was because his heart could not lie; it began to beat faster upon making eye contact with her occasionally... neither did the sweat dripping from his face.

It would be great if it wasn't a tiger inside that body... No, what am I saying!?...Just as he was thinking about this useless stuff...

"What are you spacing out for, you piece of junk? Ahhh, could it be you've already broken down?"

"... S...say whatever you like. My brain does not waste space in having to come up with words to counter your sudden insults..."

The radio warm-up was now over.

Aisaka coldly turned her head and sat down with her back towards Ryūji. Next were some stretching exercises.

"... Why do I have to gladly do my stretching exercises with you? Come to think of it, wouldn't warm-up time be over by the time we handle the balls?"

Aisaka muttered while complaining about Ryūji's botched plan, stretching her tiny fingers forward, she touched the tip of her sports shoes with little effort. *In order to push her back, I'll have to touch her T-shirt and her body...* Ryūji hesitated for a while, trying to remain calm and said,

"Hey, you're quite delicate! It would be great if you could talk to Kitamura like this."

"Yeah."

As the empty conversation went on, Ryūji began to feel rather unsettled, probably because he was thinking of Aisaka's looks a while ago, now he couldn't help but start noticing her body.

Below Aisaka's shoulder blades, her back felt a bit warm due to the warm up. Though it was by just a little bit, Ryūji could still make out the outline of her underwear from within.

Ryūji thought to himself *I think I've just given an awesome gift to all the guys in the class.*

"Ummph... Hey, you're getting heavy, stop pressing so hard!"

On the other hand, Ryūji was concerned about Kushieda Minori. Was Noto looking at Minori's underwear outline from under her shirt as well?

"... Ryūji, I'm... suffocating! Hey! You're heavy! Ow, hea... vy...!"

As Ryūji continued thinking, his vision moved from Aisaka's neck to the parting of her hair. As the sun rarely shined there, the back of her neck was as white as snow. The skin behind her ears all the way to her neck arteries was as smooth as polished marble, as though one would leave finger marks if they were to touch it... Just looking at it was enough to make one's heart race and their breathing faster...

"...! ...! ...!"

"... Huh? Why do you look like you're in pain?"

As he let go, Aisaka rose up and inhaled deeply, like a diver coming out from the sea,

"Y... you'll find out in a moment... Come, swap..."

Aisaka smiled at Ryūji for the first time. *Just what happened?* Ryūji didn't understand. *Did something good happen?*

About a minute later, it was Ryūji's turn to face his back towards Aisaka as he sat down. "Remember not to push too hard!" Ryūji said as he turned around.

And then he felt it.

It was a distance away when it began to leap and jump high up...

"Idi... Sto... Whoa...!"

With its weight and momentum, this tiger was attempting to break Ryūji's back as it fell harshly on him. His waist felt like it was going to give in.

"Damn it... that hurts...!"

"I was in quite a lot of pain as well a while ago, so now we're even!"

This did nothing but waste all their energy. Finally, it was time to practice passing the ball. After being hit by Aisaka's flying kick, Ryūji's legs felt like they were about to crack. *It'll be a miracle if I can continue the rest of the PE lesson like this!*

"Let's hurry up with our plan already, alright?"

Aisaka said, standing about 5 meters from him. The other classmates also began passing their balls, the sound of balls bouncing echoed around the gymnasium.

Their plan was to have Ryūji gently toss the ball towards Kitamura's partner mid-way through the passing exercise - That was the original plan of course, however, there was now a problem...

Diagonally behind Aisaka and diagonally in front of Ryūji, the person currently teamed up with Kitamura was Kihara-san - a girl.

No matter how lightly he might throw, Ryūji was still hesitant to deliberately injure a girl. *Anyway, let me pass the ball to Aisaka first!*

"... What the, how come you're passing the ball instead...?"

Her large eyes reflected the light like a sharp blade, shooting directly at Ryūji.

"... I'm waiting for a good chance. C'mon, pass me the ball!"

"..."

With a scowl, Aisaka flung the ball back at Ryūji hard. As Ryūji caught the ball, Aisaka quickly gestured with her chin.

Do it!

"... Okay, okay..."

After bouncing it for a while, he tossed the ball out again. Having received the ball, Aisaka's mouth turned into an inverted V-shape,

"Hey! What the hell? Hurry up already!"

Aisaka handled the ball expertly like a skilled basketball player. After a few bounces...

"Here!"

"Whoa!"

The basketball shot towards his face like a bullet.

"W, why you..."

Ryūji managed to quickly catch the ball after half of his face got scratched by it. By the way, Ryūji wasn't feeling mad, okay, maybe he was feeling a bit mad, but he was feeling scared a bit more.

"Hey Ryūji! C'mon! Pass it to me!"

Aisaka on the other hand, paced left and right annoyingly as though nothing had happened, her sneakers squeaking on the floor as she moved. Of course she didn't intend to really catch the ball, as she simply waved her arms about. *Might as well try a manly pass!* However, just as Ryūji was about to accumulate his strength for the throw...

"Ah..."

Aisaka suddenly looked somewhere else, forcing Ryūji to quickly come to a halt.

"What the hell are you looking at?!"

In front of Aisaka's vision after she turned around... " Sheesh~ Kitamura-kun, just where do you think you're

tossing the ball?" "My bad!" Kihara Maya began to chase after the ball that rolled off, which landed just in front of Aisaka's feet.

"..."

A scowl.

Speaking of which, even Aisaka was not sure what expression to make aside from that as she picked up the ball.

"Wah! Aisaka-san! I'm sorry, are you mad!? I'm really sorry, we didn't mean it!"

Could it be because she's also a girl that it's easier to communicate with her? Kihara's smile revealed none of the terrified expressions the guys would normally make. " Can you pass it over, please!" Kihara waved her arm, and then realizing her shoelace was loose, quickly bent down to tie it.

In place of her calling Aisaka was...

"Hey... Aisaka! Sorry about that, can you pass it to me please?"

It was none other than the Mr. Nice Guy with flashy glasses - Kitamura Yūsaku. As expected of Kitamura, he treated every girl the same way, guess that's what people call being "innocent".

Creak! Aisaka suddenly stopped functioning as though her engine had run out of gas. Ryūji could not see her expression from his position, though he could tell very clearly that her body was now as rigid as a springboard.

"Cre~ak..." Aisaka started to move in a seemingly damaging way with all that creaking noise. She walked a few steps - right arm and right leg together, followed by left arm and left leg together - towards the ball. Without even saying "Look out!" or "Here I go!", she silently tossed the ball over. Sorry, she hurled the ball over, and in a pretty pathetically rigid way too.

After bouncing a few times, the ball rolled straight and ...

"Thanks!"

Went straight into Kitamura's hand, who made a very cheesy V-sign on his forehead. By the way, he had his

T-shirt completely tucked into his trousers, while the loose parts of his trousers were tightly wrapped around his legs.

"Ai, Aisaka...?"

"..."

Aisaka, who seemed to like that sort of guy, had ceased all signs of life... *At least it looks that way.* She didn't even respond to Ryūji's calls as she stood still, not caring that she was standing in a spot that was obstructing other people from passing their balls.

Ryūji decided to give up after calling her a few times. He carefully approached Aisaka, and without exciting or provoking her...

"... Aisaka!"

"..."

He softly tugged her T-shirt sleeve, and slowly pulled her back bit by bit. Unexpectedly, Aisaka actually followed obediently. And so, he succeeded in pulling her back to their original warm up spot. He took a peek at her silent face...

"Whoa!"

Ryūji quickly backed off. Aisaka Taiga was actually smiling! It was not easy to tell, but upon closer inspection one could see that she was smiling.

Her eyes were squinted small like a kitten that had just finished eating, her puffed up face was caressed by her hands and her mouth revealed the shape of an equilateral triangle. She remained like that until her neck became cherry red in color and her ears became bright red. If one listed intently, they would hear the faint whiffs that emitted from the depths of her abdomen...

"Heh, heh, heh, heh, heh..."

... She was giggling.

"H, hey... Aisaka, what's wrong?"

"Heh... what now?! The one who's looking wrong is you! Why are you looking so stunned? You should be happy for me as well, like a dog."

"... Happy? For you?"

After hearing this unexpected statement, it was Ryūji's turn to become silent. *Happy for what?* Though Aisaka was pouting, she still appeared to be in a very good mood... Her hands were now grabbing her ponytail and had begun spinning slowly... *Is she... dancing...?*

But, why? How'd it come to this? Somehow it felt difficult to ask that in a situation like this... Ryūji, whose arm was whipped by her ponytail, frowned and asked,

"Hey... Hey! Why should I be happy?"

Aisaka stopped upon hearing the very direct question, she then scowled and exclaimed, "Wha?!"

"What are you moaning about? Have you forgotten just what we have been fighting for? That's right, I see... since you are a complete and utter idiot anyway. Just how tiny is that brain of yours? Huh? Stop fooling around already! I have no time to waste with you! I'll tell you since I'm in a good mood right now! You wanna hear it right? Right? Ki, Kitamura-kun just practiced passing the ball with me! Heh heh..."

She then reverted to her giggling. "Heh, heh, heh, heh, heh" ... After thinking for a while, Ryūji finally spoke,

"... What's that supposed to mean?"

"Huh?! Seriously, a dog has no right to complain..."

"... I'm not complaining... it's the way you're happy for... Sorry for being blunt, but aren't you happy for all the wrong reasons? When you said practice passing the ball... didn't you just simply pass the ball to him only once? Besides, was your goal just to practice passing the ball with him? Aren't you supposed to use that opportunity to start a conversation with him and get to know each other better?"

Ah...

Aisaka's grin was quickly replaced by her usual grim expression. "Right?" Ryūji continued,

"Furthermore, just what was that about? Did you even speak to him? Didn't you keep quiet the whole time? All you did was stiffly throw the ball out and he simply said thanks, and you call that a conversation?"

He picked up the ball while mimicking the cheesy V-sign Kitamura made a while ago. As a result...

"Hmph!"

Aisaka quickly turned and slammed her hand on the ball he was holding.

As a result of the great force applied, the ball bounced very high up, nearly touching the ceiling.

WHACK!

It then landed straight on top of Ryūji's head. Aisaka caught the ball as it bounced back and said,

"You're right... Hmm, so you can say something useful once in a while! Then, let's continue with our plan!"

With a high-and-mighty expression, Aisaka gave Ryūji , who was still writhing in pain, a kick and returned to her warm-up position.

"Hey, Ryūji!"

"Whoa!"

She immediately made a high speed pass. Ryūji wasn't even prepared when he grabbed the ball... more like, the ball smacked straight against Ryūji's chest.

"... Hey that hurts!"

Ryūji cried. Yet Aisaka's eyes glittered dangerously, she was geared up to the point of going crazy. The force of the throw was much stronger than before and it looked as though Aisaka was now engulfed in flames. It seemed that momentous chatter and joy had fanned the flames of love within Aisaka. Suddenly, she made the tricky request once again,

"Hey, hurry up and stick with the plan already. This time we must succeed."

"... Well, you know... this plan..."

"What are you mumbling about? Weren't you the one that came up with this plan!? Practice time's almost up!"

She's absolutely right, but...

Ryūji turned slightly and glanced at Kitamura's partner... *I just can't do this!* He shook his head while thinking, *No matter how softly I throw the ball, that person's still a girl. I really can't do it! Perhaps I should just stay like this until the practice ends, but...*

That's it!

Ryūji suddenly widened his eyes. *Alright, I'll do this, I'll just remain in this position until the end. Aisaka's gonna go ballistic, but it can't be helped... I'll have to think of something to say to her...*

"What the hell are you waiting for, you lowlife... Ah, damn! Why does my nose have to itch now..."

Now's my chance! Ryūji fired away with the speed of a machine gun at Aisaka who was now busily scratching her nose.

"How'd you manage? You look terrible! Speaking of which, you sneezed quite a lot last night, did you get a

nose infection? Or did you catch a cold? Or is your nose too sensitive? Could it be that your nose was damaged by the reek from that horrid kitchen of yours? When was the last time you cleaned that place? You've probably never even cleaned your place, have you? Such a waste of a nice carpet... Oh yeah, where'd you get that carpet? It looks awesome, it's not made in Japan, is it? I'd sure like to get my hands on one of those..."

"What carpet?! Shut up already! Just what the hell are you rambling about? How should I know... Ugh... my nose... ugh... Ahhh, you're annoying! That's not important, hurry up with the plan... ugh...~!"

Aisaka now frantically scratched her nose while feeling very peeved. *Looks like she's about to explode!*

"Hey, pass it over! Paaaaa------ssssss!!!"

Aisaka exclaimed loudly while waving her arms around like Spider-Woman. Her eyes read "If you actually throw this towards me, you're dead meat!"

But there's only enough time to pass one more time... Ryūji made a rough estimate in his head, *Guess I'll just make another regular pass! Is Aisaka's nose itchy again? Her face looks really twisted...*

"... Ugh... aaah..."

"Okay! I'm gonna pass, Aisaka!"

This time Ryūji used a lot of strength in his throw.

However, Aisaka unexpectedly leaned backwards,

And at the same moment...

"AH-CHOO!"

"AHHH!!!!!"

Oh shit!

The two sounds that echoed around the gymnasium were Aisaka's sneezing and Ryūji cry of terror... *I didn't do this on purpose! I swear! It wasn't deliberate!*

Yet, the unfortunate happened... The ball shot straight towards Aisaka's sneezing face; it was a direct hit. Aisaka then stiffly collapsed just like that, all that was left was the ball slowly dribbling away. Ryūji was too stunned to

do anything as it all happened so quickly, it wasn't until a few seconds later that he was able to return to his senses,

"I, I'm sorry! You okay... whoa!?"

As Ryūji rushed to help pick Aisaka up, he suddenly became startled. *This is bad. S, she's fainted, and her nose is bleeding...* For some reason, the images of Inko-chan and Yasuko this morning flashed before him. They were both lying on the ground in awkward poses, and now Aisaka was the same as well. *Could the scene from this morning be an omen for what is happening now... And why am I thinking of all these meaningless things at a time like this!?*

"What's wrong, Takasu? Who's hurt? Is it Aisaka?"

The PE teacher and class rep Kitamura rushed over. *Now's the chance to let Kitamura take care of Aisaka!* Ryūji suddenly thought of such an idea, he turned to look at Aisaka at his chest...

"... NO!"

There's something wrong with this face. I can't let Kitamura see this face! Instantaneously, his sense of guilt drove him to pick up Aisaka,

"T, this is bad! I'll take her to the school clinic right away!"

As the crowd murmured, Ryūji hid Aisaka's face against his chest and bolted towards the clinic. The excited guys behind started yelling, "The Palmtop Tiger actually got taken out by that amateur Takasu!" "Now this is an interesting development!"

Aside from the general direction of the plan, nothing was going according to plan.

Takasu Ryūji started to become serious, mainly because of what had happened earlier.

I didn't do it on purpose, but... Though she's the Palmtop Tiger, still... I made her faint and gave her a nosebleed... While he feared Aisaka's retribution, he feared his conscience even more.

So when Aisaka returned to the classroom during lunch time...

"Aisaka! I know it's a bit sudden, but do you wanna have lunch together? I want to make up for what happened during PE, is that okay? Kitamura, Kushieda, why don't you join us as well?"

And so, Ryūji began his "Operation Having Lunch Together". By casually inviting Aisaka, who usually ate with Minori, to have lunch with him, who usually ate with Kitamura, she could happily have lunch with Kitamura, and he could happily have lunch with Minori. It was an impeccable plan!

Oblivious to his plans, Kitamura raised his hand without hesitation and said,

"Sounds good! This is a great combination! Then let's move our tables together, alright? Kushieda, Aisaka?"

"Yeah, sure! Let's eat together! Hey, Taiga, come over, Takasu-kun says he wants to eat with us! He says he wants to make up to you for what happened in PE... Hey! Stop standing there in the corner!"

Minori walked towards Ryūji while pulling Aisaka, who was carrying the hand-made bento that Ryūji made for her and was silent for some reason. Ryūji could

almost see the word "nervous" printed on her stiff face. *Is she really okay?* A moment of doubt flashed in his mind. On the other hand,

"We don't really need four tables, two people can share one table each."

Kitamura boldly suggested while moving the tables. " Yeah, you're right," Minori agreed and then said,

"I'll be sitting here!"

Minori quickly landed in one of the chairs. "Then I'll sit here!" As Ryūji was looking at her, Kitamura had already taken another chair.

Right next to Minori...

Right next to Kitamura...

Needless to say, there was only one thing that Ryūji wanted, and that was to sit next to Minori. The table was wide enough to sit both of them together very closely, so it was a great seat. However, Minori was already patting on the chair next to her and had begun to open her mouth. Probably to say "Taiga! Over here!"

I can't let her do that! Ryūji's eyes flashed brightly, but Ryūji still didn't have the courage to rush towards the seat next to Minori, so he instead decided to...

"Oops, I tripped!"

Ryūji pretended to trip and discreetly bumped into Aisaka's back.

"Umph!"

Aisaka quickly grasped Ryūji's intention, and decided to slowly drift her tiny body towards the seat next to Kitamura. She wanted to elegantly land right on top of the chair in a delicately balanced trajectory. *It's good. That's right!* Ryūji grabbed his fists. However, it seemed like the force of the bump was too great and Aisaka's good work was all going to go to waste as she was now falling toward the ground away from the chair...

"Whoa there!"

I can't let her fall on the floor just like that! Ryūji quickly grabbed Aisaka's hand and stepped forward, he then spun her body as though they were a dancing couple in a

competition, and landed her onto the seat next to Kitamura with precision. However, he applied too much force and Aisaka's chair nearly fell over...

"Hmph!"

Aisaka widened her feet and anchored them on the floor while grabbing hold of the desk with her hands. As the wobbling chair began to stabilize...

"... Phew..."

Ryūji naturally breathed a sigh of relief, and sat wearily next to Minori. *I wonder if that was too exaggerated ?* Ryūji thought while lifting his head.

"What's wrong, Aisaka? Your food's gonna spill if you shake the desk too much. You sure look energetic!"

"What are we having today~ What are we having today~ What are we having today~ ... Aha! We're having fried nuggets! C'mon, all together! 'Fried nuggets~'..."

Kitamura and Minori still remained cheerful in their own distinctive ways. Rather, it was the surrounding

classmates that started to murmur amongst themselves. " Now that was some dance by the Palmtop Tiger and Takasu!" "Amazing indeed!"

But the gossip didn't enter Aisaka's ears, instead she was very...

"....."

... Prepared. She had no intention of opening her bento box; meanwhile her expressionless face was stiff and ridged. She placed her hands by the box and her eyes flashed with a dangerous glitter. *Aisaka can't even speak properly to him, perhaps it was too soon to have her have lunch with Kitamura?*

But it was Kitamura, who sat closest to her that spoke first,

"Hmm, so Aisaka also brought a bento. Did your mom make this? Or did you make this on your own?"

Kitamura innocently asked without thinking too much . Ryūji gripped his chopsticks and watched intently. *C'mon, Aisaka. You've already come this far, so stop running away! Use this chance to chat with him and get familiar with him!* And then...

"... Huh? Me?" Still feeling indulged, Aisaka unhesitatingly pointed towards the answer to the question with her chopsticks, in other words, towards Ryūji's face. *Oh yeah...* Ryūji's eyes began to wander, *Come to think of it... the one who made that bento... was me...*

"Eh? Takasu? The one who made your bento was Takasu?"

But... It'll be better if I don't say it, right? ... No, that's not the problem...

"ARRGGHH!!!"

Ryūji couldn't help but yell. "What's wrong?" Kitamura looked at him, while Minori stared intently at her nuggets. Ryūji was frozen stiff, stunned by his own stupidity. *Wasn't I the one that helped prepare Aisaka's bento !? Not to mention the contents of our bentos are exactly the same. If Kitamura and Minori see this, what are they gonna think!?*

His trembling hands held tightly onto the lid of his bento box. *What am I gonna do?* Ryūji took a quick glance at Aisaka... *No good. She's completely bedazzled by Kitamura, just like a deer in headlights. Do I really have to show them the*

simple ingredient lunch we are having together? Aisaka's eyes rolled everywhere, not knowing what to do, while still pointing her chopsticks at Ryūji.

"Takasu, what's wrong? You look terrible."

"D, do I?"

That's it! I'll just pretend that I don't feel well and then escape with the bento... The voices of the gods flashed through his head as quick as lightning. Just as he was about to stand up...

"Huh? Is someone looking for me?"

Kitamura looked past Ryūji, causing Ryūji to turn around as well. Standing where Aisaka pointed her chopsticks, that is right behind Ryūji's head, was a first year male student calling out "Kitamura-senpai! Kushieda-senpai!"

"Isn't that our first year manager?"

Minori noticed him as well and stood up, urging Kitamura to get up as well. After they both stood talking to him for a while, they returned to their seats and said,

"Sorry guys! Turns out we got stuff to take care of."

"I'm really sorry, there seems to be an emergency club meeting, so our underclassman came to tell us that we have to drag our bentos and rush over to the club room right away. Taiga, Takasu-kun, we'll be going ahead first ~! Let's eat together again next time!"

After frantically packing their bentos and apologizing, they quickly left the classroom.

This all happened too quickly. Ryūji did not even have time to react and could only watch them disappear before coming to his senses,

"Ah! They've left..."

He turned to look at Aisaka,

"Whoa!"

Ryūji became even more frantic. Aisaka Taiga was now very depressed and rested her face on the bento box. She covered her face with her hands and wearily hung her head very low - Her shoulders were already small to begin with, now they looked even smaller as she wrapped herself up like a fur-ball.

"Ai, Aisaka..."

Noticing that she seemed to be muttering something, Ryūji listened intently, and he heard what sounded like mantras being chanted, "Why? It was such a good chance ! I was too unlucky! Why!? I don't understand, at this rate ..." As well as whole bunch of curses being uttered in quick succession. *She must have been really nervous and was still hoping for something good to happen...* Ryūji was at a loss for words.

But he couldn't just leave her like that.

"... W, we'll invite him for lunch tomorrow again, okay ? ... Anyway, let's eat first, alright?"

Ryūji tried his best to cheer Aisaka up, but,

"... Tomorrow?"

Waving her hair, Aisaka raised her murderous glance and asked,

"Does this mean you're going to smack my face with a ball again?"

"I never said that!"

Ryūji denied matter-of-factly. *Ugh!* Ryūji then backed off, because he saw Aisaka's face was now filling with tears. *No! Don't cry!* Ryūji started to panic, yet Aisaka said,

"Didn't you use me as an excuse in order to invite Minorin and Kitamura-kun? You can't casually invite them without a reason, can you? Or do you have another plan? I definitely do not want something that direct! Absolutely not! Absolutely...!"

"O, okay, okay! Here! Let's eat!"

Aisaka's lashes began to get wet as she talked, so Ryūji quickly stuffed a potato into her mouth with her chopsticks.

The potatoes were cut just right for Aisaka's mouth. As she had no reason to spit it out, she began munching the potato in her mouth. Seeing how hard she was chewing, Ryūji asked uncomfortably, "Is it too big?" A while later, Aisaka finally swallowed the potato, followed by,

"... Sniff!"

"Are you sneezing? Don't worry, I've got plenty of tissues!"

"No, you idiot! I was just thinking how I was about to die back there!"

Aisaka gulped down the carton of milk on the table. *Gulp, gulp, gulp...* By the time she put down the box, her tears had already dried.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Ryūji began to eat his own bento. Good thing Kitamura had to leave, or he would have really run away and left Aisaka alone and behind. Then god knows what she would have done. Thinking about it, Ryūji felt like it was a blessing in disguise.

"Ah! ... Ryūji..."

Aisaka, who was originally in a bad mood and had remained silent, now lifted her head and stared at Ryūji.

"What now?"

"... There's no meat..."

"Can it be helped? My house isn't the sort of place where you can readily find meat in the refrigerator. If you want meat, go and live with those sort of families!"

And so, the two of them silently ate their lunch.

Observing the entire spectacle the whole time, the other classmates began to wonder: "Just what's going on? " "How did this happen?" The dynamic duo was just too amazing, but no one dared come up to personally ask them.

An air of surreality had filled the whole classroom of Class 2-C... The day had finally come to an end.

Neither Ryūji or Aisaka had noticed this surreality. Both had experienced painful setbacks during PE lesson and lunch. This was the last chance for today! No matter how small the result may be, they had to at least leave some kind of impression inside Kitamura's head.

That's why...

"... Are you ready, Aisaka?"

"..."

"Ai, Aisaka, deep breaths! Remember to breath deeply! "

"... Heave, ho..."

It was just before homeroom session began...

In one noisy corner of the classroom, Aisaka wore a serious expression. Even Ryūji wore one, mostly out of guilt, which bound his entire body like a chain.

"I'm getting nervous already... Won't it be too bothersome to do something like this?"

"Why are you saying things like that now that we've come this far? Relax! It's rare for guys to feel unhappy at receiving hand-made cookies from a girl. Besides, Kitamura likes sweet things, and he isn't the type to turn down hand-made stuff. Moreover, he doesn't seem to hate you..."

"I, is that true?"

You bet! Ryūji nodded his head, allowing Aisaka to relax her stiff expression a bit. Carefully held in her little hands were the cookies that she carefully baked during Home Economics class.

As that class was co-ed, no one would think too much about giving hand-made food to the opposite gender. Indeed there were guys hoping to receive leftover cookies from the girls, and girls making extra cookies on their own in order to give some to their boyfriends.

Without letting anyone see her, Aisaka secretly (mostly using Ryūji's body as a shield) spent a lot of effort making all sorts of colorful cookies. And so, they came up with a plan to casually give the cookies to Kitamura, codenamed "Operation I Made Extra, Would You Like Some". This would give Kitamura a good impression of Aisaka. However, things did not go quite as planned. Of the ten extra cookies secretly baked, six were roasted into charcoal... *This is all thanks to that hopeless tiger getting the oven temperature wrong!* Moreover, in order to destroy the evidence, all six of those roasted cookies ended up in Ryūji's stomach.

Only four pieces survived without harm. *Aisaka Taiga, your success depends upon these four pieces of cookies!* Aisaka

held her fist tightly while nervously holding the cookie wrapper to her chest. Looking at her anxious expression from 30cm above, an ominous feeling grew in Ryūji's heart, *I wonder if that nervous expression is going to lead to any disasters?*

"Anyway, listen up! Don't push things too far, just try and act as though it's nothing! And don't get nervous all of a sudden..."

"Yeah, I know. Relax, right? Relax... relax..."

Aisaka loosened up her hands... and then her buttocks. .. and then her tiny body as well...

"Alright! Everybody back to your seats! Homeroom's about to begin!"

Aisaka got startled by the voice of the homeroom teacher. Amongst the students rushing back to their seats , the 145cm tall creature slowly wobbled into the aisle.

Once everyone had greeted the teacher at the end of class, she would have to quickly call out to Kitamura... That was the order given to her by Ryūji. *As Kitamura is usually busy, he will probably head to the Student Council first thing after school. Once he's done there, he still has club*

activities. If you just sit there daydreaming, he'll be out of the classroom before you even realize it!

So she must call him out at the fastest speed possible once homeroom session had ended, yet...

"... Hello? Hello~...?"

Ryūji took a quick glance at Aisaka back and sighed.

Although he knew Aisaka would be nervous, he never expected her to be this nervous. Aisaka grabbed hold of her desk, her back arching as though she had a stomach ache, her feet shaking violently, and her face turning pale white while looking like a demon.

"Oh my~... There's quite a sweet smell in the classroom today! Let's see... flour, sugar, butter... Ah, that's right! You were making cookies for today's Home Economics right? I lo~ve cookies! Hee hee hee, how nostalgic... I can still remember baking cookies with my homestay family while I was studying abroad in England..."

"Tch!"

It seems the teacher (Koigakubo Yuri, single, age 29) was feeling rosy while attempting to continue with her

pointless chatter. Feeling nervous and agitated at the same time, Aisaka cruelly clicked her tongue. Startled at this, the teacher (Koigakubo Yuri, single, turning 30 in two months' time) shuddered while looking at Aisaka with her head lowered...

"... Y, you mustn't make such noise in front of a teacher ..."

The classmates sitting around Aisaka were already trembling in fear, the teacher decided to fearlessly continue speaking, but...

"Tch!"

"... U, umm... It's not nice for a girl to make such noise.. ."

"Tch!"

"... Ahhh, my words cannot reach the heart of my students..."

In the end, she covered her face in her hands and began sobbing. *Knowing it'll come to this, wouldn't it have*

been better if she had just shut up? She just had to take on something that was beyond her power. It's no wonder she's still single.

"Sensei!"

Clatter. The sound of someone standing up, it was Kitamura.

"It seems there's still some time before homeroom session ends, how about letting me handle the rest as Class Representative? Besides, a lot of us have club activities afterwards, so I believe it would be better to discuss this tomorrow morning!"

What he was really trying to convey was: *We're very busy, so can we end this homeroom session at once?* Yet the single lady (Koigakubo Yuri, Homeroom Teacher, 7 years of boyfriendless experience) sobbed and said,

"... I don't understand what Kitamura-kun's trying to say..."

Just can't communicate with her, huh? Even Ryūji felt exasperated. But Kitamura wasn't called "Maruo" for nothing. He stood with his legs firmly apart and announced to the whole class,

"... We've got art and craft tomorrow, so don't forget to bring your stuff! Everyone stand! Bow! Goodbye~ Sensei ~!"

"Goodbye~ Sensei~!" Everyone repeated. *Okay, let's go home!* Thus homeroom session was unilaterally ended by the students. The single lady (let's not repeat this) sniffed and said, "I'm really not suited for this job." And left without saying anything else.

"Ai, Aisaka!"

Ryūji stood up, trying to look for Aisaka, who also quickly got up. At that moment...

"Uwaa!"

She dropped her bag on the floor, she was already beginning to panic. *Such a clumsy girl! Now where's Kitamura?* Ryūji turned to look around.

"Goodness, it's this late already... I'm so gonna get scolded by the President."

Kitamura quickly picked up his bag and ran towards the classroom door. *Oh no! If she can't stop him before he*

gets to the Student Council room, there won't be any chance for her to be alone with Kitamura. Ryūji quickly ran to Aisaka's side,

"Forget your bag, just call him out already!"

"Ah, um... Ki, Ki... Ki..."

What the hell, man? Ryūji scratched his head in frustration. Aisaka had stood up and stretched her arm towards Kitamura's bag, but his name just wouldn't come out of her mouth. As if she had been struck by a spell which caused her to forget how to utter " Kitamura-kun", she was now close to tears as she opened and closed her mouth continuously.

"Damn! He's left already! Hurry up and go after him!"

"Ah... yeah!"

As he nudged her tiny body, she quickly took off and started running. Ryūji also gave chase in long strides. *If I let this clumsy idiot run on her own, who knows what trouble she'll get herself into.*

Clutching the packet of cookies at her chest, Aisaka and Ryūji left the classroom in pursuit of Kitamura. At

the end of the corridor, they spotted their target turning at a corner.

"That way! Go!"

As they arrived at the staircase, they found themselves going against a tide of students coming down. Aisaka tried to speed up, yet it was hard to get past this crowd of students rushing home after classes, but...

"Out of my way! Scram!"

Aisaka simply said this simple sentence. "Whoa! It's the Palmtop Tiger!" "Everybody move! It's dangerous!" The students ahead of her quickly parted like the Red Sea and allowed Moses to pass through. Once she had gone past them, they quickly merged again...

"Sorry! Can you please let me through?"

Ryūji requested simply. "Whoa! It's Takasu!" "The two bosses going after each other!" ... Once again the Red Sea parted. It looked like Ryūji was still regarded as a delinquent outside of Class 2-C, causing him to pause in depression. *Now's not the time to fret about this!* Ryūji quickly picked himself up and started to give chase again .

Yet that moment of hesitation meant he had lost sight of Kitamura and could just barely see Aisaka's long hair climbing upwards at the top of the stairs. Kitamura and Aisaka sure could run, but Ryūji had to catch his breath while climbing two steps at a time...

Then he suddenly realized, it didn't really matter if he didn't catch up with them. *It'll be fine as long as Aisaka can call out to Kitamura, and all I need to do is make sure she does it.*

"... Hah... hah..."

Ryūji took a few deep breaths as he came to a stop, and then casually looked up... Simultaneously, he began to yell,

"WHOOOOAAAAA!!!!!"

As Aisaka came to the final step, she tripped and began to fall backwards, just as Ryūji had turned his glance upwards.

After the yell, an incredible force only seen during a disaster was awakened.

Ryūji "flew" at an incredible speed.

"......!"

As elegant as a baseball outfield player, he leapt to the half-way platform and miraculously caught Aisaka within his arms. However, as the impact was too great, Ryūji's back crashed into the wall behind him as he carried that little figure with him. *Umph!* Ryūji grunted in a comical way, his eyes widening due to the sudden pain. Within his vision, he saw a familiar packet flying out of Aisaka's hands in an arc, out of the window.

This was the third floor...

What had fallen were those four cookies that they worked so hard to bake.

"AH!" Aisaka made a scream and stuck her arm out of the window. But it was already too late, as they had long fallen outside.

"Ai..."

Aisaka... Ryūji noticed he had wanted to speak but could not, as the pain in his back prevented him from catching his breath properly.

"Ryūji!"

Though his voice was weak, Aisaka could still hear him. She held tightly into Ryūji, unable to say anything, her expression froze as though she had just eaten something poisonous.

I'm fine... It seemed he could breathe a bit, so Ryūji waved his hand towards her to signal that he was alright and there was no need for her to look so worried.

What was important were the cookies, and Kitamura. Ryūji pointed towards the window and the stairs...

"... H... Hurry... Retrieve... the cookies..."

Ryūji could barely make some noise, and then he slowly pushed Aisaka off. This was partly driven by Ryūji's determination *You worked so hard to make those cookies, even though I helped along the way. I too wish for them to be given to Kitamura.*

He wanted Aisaka's determination and hard work to be properly conveyed to Kitamura.

Yet Aisaka was not even looking at where Ryūji was pointing,

"Ryūji, are you alright?! ... Ahh, how did this happen... "

She frantically touched Ryūji's neck and ankles to make sure no bones were broken. To see the normally violent Palmtop Tiger looking concerned over him due to him getting hurt trying to protect her, Ryūji thought to himself, *If possible, I wish this could continue, but...*

"I'm fine. So... Here, see? I'm not hurt at all."

Ryūji forcefully pretended to be fine and began to stand up and do stretching exercises for Aisaka. Aside from his back, which didn't hurt to the point of being paralyzed, it seemed like he wasn't hurt anywhere else. Seeing him like that, Aisaka finally breathed a sigh of relief,

"Ryūji... I... I..."

She stretched her hands towards Ryūji, with an expression which Ryūji had never seen before, as though trying to say something...

"Hey! Who's throwing stuff out of the window!? Show yourselves now!"

Ugh! Both of them groaned. It was the ultra-mean School Dean. As it had came to this, there was no longer any time left to bring the cookies to Kitamura.

"... Such perfect timing. Looks like it can't be helped, hurry up and go get scolded by him then hurry back up, I'll wait for you in the classroom."

"... But... Then I'll carry you to the classroom first!"

"Don't bother, I can still walk. So hurry on, we don't want this to get any more troublesome."

Hurry up, go on. Ryūji gestured her to leave by pushing on her back, while Aisaka fretted her brows and turned her head many times towards Ryūji before finally walking down the stairs.

During this time, the teacher's voice was getting more and more fierce. *Aisaka needs to hurry up... Speaking of which, has there ever been anyone capable of scolding the unchallengeable Palmtop Tiger? I really have no idea.*

"... Phew... Looks like I used *it* up..."

Now it was just him alone, Ryūji walked slowly while talking to himself.

He remembered what Yasuko had told him while he was in elementary school. Yasuko said she was a so-called "mi~ni esper", in that she had the power to teleport randomly three times during her life. She used it the first time when she was still a kid, where she encountered a traffic accident and was flung off twenty meters, she managed to teleport herself to safety before she could hit the ground and get herself injured. The second time was when she left her home in order to give birth to Ryūji, during her journey to meet the beloved man who liked sticking a magazine on his abdomen. Yasuko didn't go into details, all he knew was that it was thanks to her teleportation ability that she managed to safely reach that man's side.

And, as for the third and final time, she said, "I'll leave it for Ryū-chan to use! Ya-chan no longer has any need to use that power." She then slapped her hand on the still-little Ryūji and transferred her power to him. Yasuko added, "If you encountered something dangerous, then use this power, and return safely to Ya-chan!"

In the end, Ryūji used this power only to help Aisaka. He was tempted to use it whenever he was running late for school, or during many other occasions... *Good thing I never used it till now!*

Though he felt bad for Yasuko for using it like this, that was what Ryūji genuinely thought.

* * *

"Are you sure you're really alright?"

"I've told you a million times already, I'm fine!"

"Good. Though you're my dog, I'd lose sleep if you got hurt..."

Aisaka said softly, leaning her forehead against the window glass. *Can't believe you actually have the guts to say that after trying to break into my house and kill me with a wooden blade...* Ryūji had wanted to say, yet for some reason, he remained silent.

After retrieving the cookies and returning to the classroom, Aisaka's voice had become very weak, it seemed like she had gone into depression.

The silent classroom after school was empty, with only Aisaka and Ryūji inside. Aside from Ryūji, no one else had seen this side of the Palmtop Tiger before.

"... I'm always a failure, nothing ever comes out right... "

Her self utterances no longer had the enthusiasm she had earlier in the day.

"This is only the first day of our effort, so it's actually not surprising that we haven't succeeded yet."

"... Is that so? But if I wasn't so clumsy, if only I was a bit smarter... even you got affected. Nothing has been going smoothly, has it? ... I've had enough already..."

Aisaka leaned back on the window and slid down. Sitting beside Ryūji's legs, she wrapped up her tiny legs.

Twirling her long hair, she attempted to bury her expression in her hair and said,

"For the past seventeen years I never realized... but now I know how clumsy I am..."

"Um, I guess..."

"If you want to say it, then say it clearly!"

Her tiny hands tugged at Ryūji's trousers,

"You too... even Ryūji thinks that way, huh? You must think I'm hopelessly clumsy beyond help, right?"

As he lowered his head, he found himself exchanging glances with Aisaka, who was looking up. She rested her cheek on her knees while her eyes quavered with sadness .

Her usual attack mode had vanished, replaced with unsettlement in her eyes - mostly caused by her self-lamenting.

"... Well, it was actually my fault during PE lesson, not to mention the plan itself was too incomplete..."

"It's not just that, there's also my clumsiness..."

Aisaka wearily closed her eyes, as though recalling all the chaotic events of the day.

The PE lesson in third period, the unlucky lunch break , and the massive let-down a while ago...

Once he realized that Aisaka was the one who threw that packet of cookies out, the Dean knew it was impossible to reprimand her, so he quickly let her return to the classroom.

It was fortunate nothing bad came out it, but...

"... So much for making all that effort to make those cookies... and... sigh..."

As Aisaka muttered to herself, she noticed a small scratch under her chin. It was caused by her chin rubbing against her buttons while Ryūji saved her from getting injured. She softly caressed the scratch while taking out the packet of cookies from her pocket - all that was left were the few pieces of crumbs that didn't fly off.

"Writing a love letter, but placing it in the wrong bag; trying to beat someone, but instead fainting from starvation; getting hit by the ball while practicing; finding people for lunch, but they had to leave; accidentally roasting the cookies, tripping, falling and dropping them out of the window; and... all these... this is just..."

"Oh, and you forgot one more... forgetting to put your letter in the envelope!"

"Yeah, you're right..."

Ryūji was trying to joke to cheer her up, but the way he expressed it didn't feel right. Sinking into sadness, Aisaka buried her head into her knees and went quiet.

"Ai, Aisaka..."

No response.

Squatting down in an awkward pose, she wrapped herself tightly and remained still, like a snail burrowing into its shell; only her tiny fingers could be seen trembling. Her soft hair hanging from her shoulders moved slightly with the rhythm of her breathing.

Now was not the time, yet Ryūji still felt that...

Women are just so devious.

No matter how arrogant they may be, or how much trouble they may bring to others, as long as they made that expression, they would quickly melt the heart of any man.

This expression was impossible to ignore.

Very impossible to disregard.

So Ryūji scratched his head, and intensified his glare. He first went to his desk, then returned to Aisaka, and sat down next to her.

"... Aisaka, let's swap!"

"...?"

Ryūji tapped her shoulder in order to get her to look up, while pretending he didn't see the tears in the corner of her eyes. He placed his baked cookies wrapped in a very manly aluminum foil on her lap, and then he took her cookie wrapper in exchange.

Ryūji gently opened the very battered wrapper; there were only a few pieces of crumbs inside, though there was still quite an amount.

"Eh... wait... Ryūji, those were just picked up from the ground, a, and they're..."

"Since I only ate your roasted cookies before, I'm really curious to know what these taste like!"

After replying stiffly, he ignored Aisaka's protest and stuffed the crumbs into his mouth. Afterwards...

"..."

Silence.

When he ate her roasted cookies a while ago, the recent heat from the oven, the bitter charcoal taste, as well as being coerced into swallowing them all in one go by Aisaka, meant that Ryūji quickly spat them all out... So this was really the first time Ryūji had tried Aisaka's cooking... It was just that, she probably... *Mixed up the sugar and salt...*

"A, are the cookies... delicious?"

"... Ahhh! They're tasty!"

Aisaka worryingly widened her eyes.

"Yeah, they taste great! Ah... too bad you can't give these to Kitamura. Better luck next time, eh?"

Ryūji managed to worm his way out with his genetically inherited poker face and then urged Aisaka to try his cookies. Aisaka carefully opened the wrapper, then looked at Ryūji with amazement,

"Uwah... Amazing! They look perfect. Can I really eat them?"

"I wanted to take them back for my mom, but I guess it doesn't matter, they're all yours."

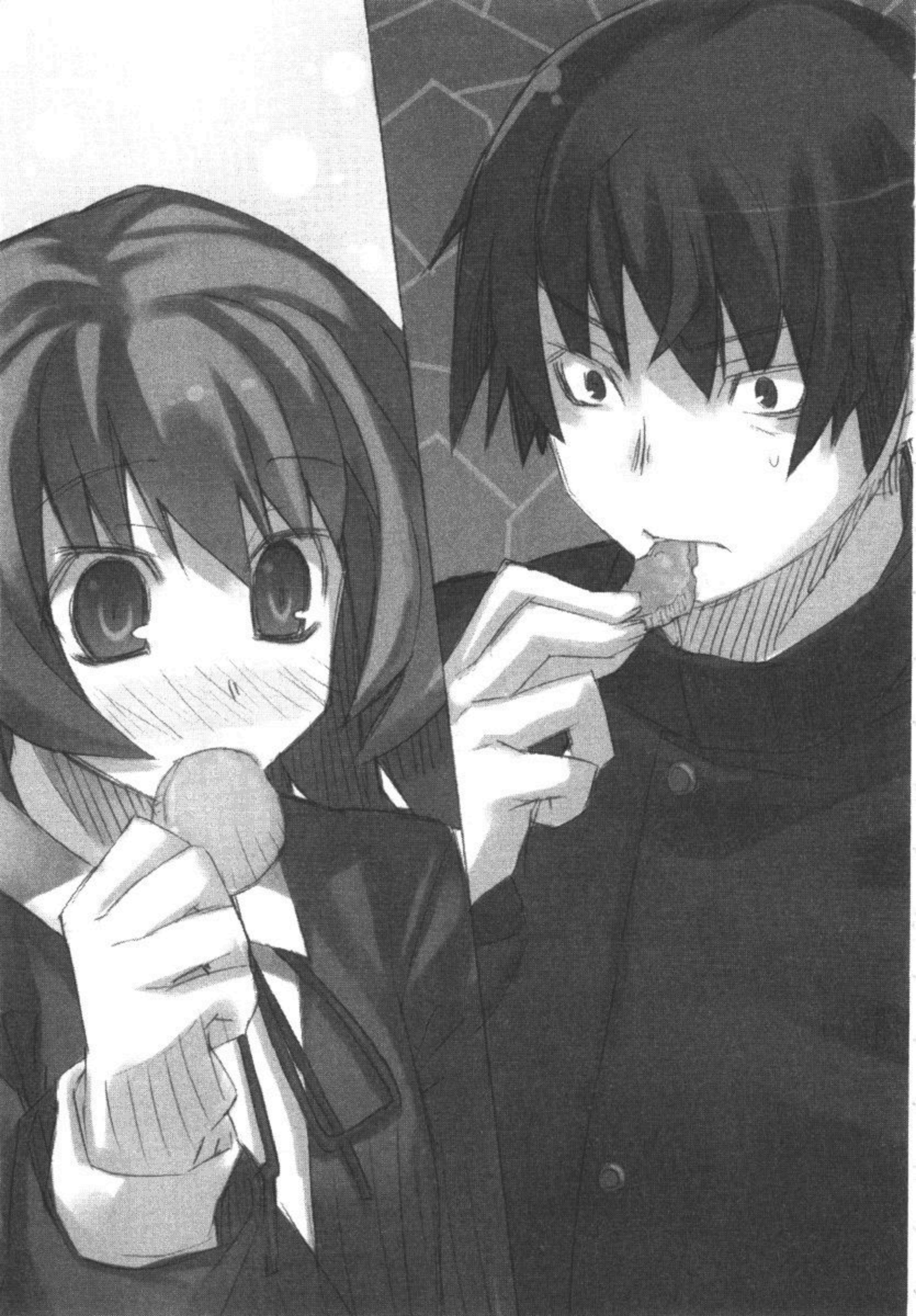
The cookies were baked very thinly, this special edition was sprinkled with sugar on top with extra butter . Aisaka stared at the cookies for a while...

"... They're tasty! Really!"

Her eyes widened as she put them in her mouth.

"... This is the first time I've heard you say the word ' tasty'."

"This is incredible, it's so much better than those sold in the bakery!"



"According to my experience, for bakery products, it always tastes better if you make them yourself rather than buying them. Of course, this has to do with my personal preference, but for those who like their cookies suitably soft after coming out of the oven, I'd prefer baking them myself."

"I see... um... I... like this, I really do!"

Aisaka looked just like any other normal girl as she concentrated on eating the cookies. "Delicious!" She said with her cheeks stuffed with cookies, she licked the sugar around her lips and added quietly, "It'd be great if it was served with red tea!"

... Who'd recognize this?

Besides me, who else would recognize this side of Aisaka Taiga?

An incredible feeling. Until yesterday, like many other classmates, he too had feared the "Palmtop Tiger". He not only feared being bitten, he also feared having anything to do with her world. *So Aisaka Taiga is this kind of person...* Back then, he was hardly even interested in such things.

This girl... the daughter of some infamous gangster boss or karate master, a cruel girl who treated people like dogs, got so nervous upon seeing her crush that she forgot how to speak, an unbelievably clumsy girl, and then got depressed to the verge of tears due to being ashamed of her clumsiness... She was always hungry, and loved tasty food and snacks.

She was an extremely peculiar girl... always causing trouble for people, and giving people a headache.

But Ryūji suddenly realized he did not dislike her peculiarity. He even thought, *I'm glad I met this kind of person.* At this moment, he felt blissful for some reason.

Yes. Even though she's annoying, even though I'm troubled by her, when she gets hurt, I just want to comfort her... If I'm thinking like this, then Aisaka to me is...

"... Hey, Ryūji! I think I know now!"

... He got startled.

Returning to his senses, he saw Aisaka Taiga staring at him from a very close distance. Though her face was small, her complexion was fair, her large and nearly transparent eyes glittered with stars every time she

blinked, those were really beautiful eyes. Even though she was small, her face was hardly child-like... Ryūji suddenly realized all this, and something resembling a cold shiver went up his spine.

Ahem! Ryūji cleared his throat,

"...K, know what?"

He hesitatingly asked, and then...

"It's all because you didn't help me out properly! You're such a dumb dog! A hopelessly dumb dog!"

"..."

What the hell!? Aisaka shrugged her shoulders and looked contemptuously at Ryūji. *How should I put this... Looks like she's herself again... But still, what the hell!?*

Ryūji was really getting pissed, thinking, *How can there be such a person!?* Yet, he saw Aisaka give a gentle smile... *Forget it. I'll let her off this time!*

Think of it as a special offer from me!

* * *

On the way back, they kept some distance between each other, though they were headed in the same direction.

Approaching the school gate, Aisaka, walking ahead, stopped in her footsteps. From her position, one could see the track field beyond the trees.

"What is it?"

"... The softball club. Minorin is there."

Aisaka pointed ahead, running energetically under the sunset was none other than Minori. As though she was carrying a prism, in an instant only Minori remained within Ryūji's vision.

But Ryūji understood that Aisaka was not looking at where her finger was pointing. Her eyes were fixed towards one of the dark-haired guys on the other end of the field doing warm up exercises. It was Kitamura.

Stopping in her footsteps, Aisaka stood still, her cheek was dyed caramel by the orange sunset. A soft breeze blew, yet Aisaka remained still.

She must really, really like Kitamura Yūsaku.

"... Hey, can I ask you... why Kitamura?"

She turned her head as a result of Ryūji's question, but she did not answer, and simply blinked. She stared at Ryūji with her clear eyes and said,

"I'll be going ahead first. Why don't you stay here for a while longer?"

She appeared to be trying to change the subject. Though it didn't matter whether she answered his question or not, since even Ryūji didn't know why he asked that.

"... You're going ahead first? What do you mean?"

"I'm sure you want to stare at Minorin with those horny eyes of yours for a bit longer. You can forget about me helping to arrange for you two to get together, but at the very least I can let you look at her for a while longer! She's beautiful, isn't she? So I understand why you chose her... I'm not that unreasonable, you know! Come to my house to make dinner at eight tonight, that is all!"

What do you mean "that is all"?! No, what do you mean " come to my house to make dinner"... No, what do you mean " that is all"?!

Not waiting for Ryūji to ask any further, Aisaka turned around and walked off in large strides, and then...

"...Uwaa!"

Her clumsiness mode set in again as she tripped over the lining in the tarmac... Her bag flew out of her hand as she fell without warning like a small child.

"Ah! Ah...! Just what are you doing?!"

Ryūji sighed deeply and rushed towards Aisaka and picked her up while she muttered, "Shut up! Leave me alone!" After picking up her bag and patting off the dust on her skirt, Ryūji noticed that Aisaka's knees were full

of bruises... *She must've tripped a countless number of times when no one was watching.*

How can I just leave such a careless fellow alone like that? Ryūji sighed again. He then looked straight into Aisaka's face,

"What'd you want for dinner? You don't have any problem with me eating with you, right? I'll make my mom's share and take it home with me, okay? You'll be paying for the ingredients, right? Oh, I remember your refrigerator's empty. In that case, we can't do anything without going to the supermarket first... Oh yeah, we gotta buy some mold removal liquid and dish washing detergent!"

Can't be helped, I guess... Ryūji thought.

"So be it!" Aisaka exclaimed. This was because she had no way of refusing. After yesterday and today, he knew this girl was stubborn, unreasonable, self-lamenting yet also obnoxious. Threatening her was useless; when she decided to do something, she would do it. Not to mention, there were so many things that he was worried about her.

Which is why... I can't just leave her alone like that. Can't be helped.

Besides, there were still plenty of dirt marks in Aisaka's European kitchen that bothered him.

Chapter 5

"Hey, move your head over! You're blocking the TV!"

The head that was blocking half of the TV screen from Ryūji's vision replied without turning,

"Ah, shut up already! Can't you just shift over a bit?"

Speaking nonchalantly, Aisaka gave a very irksome reply.

"What?! I believe that's *my* TV!! Say that again and you can get the hell out! You live just beyond that window anyway!"

"..."

"STOP. IGNORING. ME!!!"

Ryūji's yell finally got Aisaka to turn her head around, her eyes glittered under her long eyelashes, reflecting a cold stare,

"I'm watching TV right now, so can you keep it down? Sigh~ A stupid dog never learns, does he?"

"Why!!! Why you..."

Annoying neighbor was the first thing that came to Ryūji's mind. As he stood up in front of the small table, about to poke the person who was occupying the TV screen and claiming to be Ryūji's master...

"Ryū~-chan... you mustn't fight now~"

Yasuko appeared before the opened fusuma and told him,

"Yesterday Ya-chan got scolded by the landlady. She said we were already noisy to begin with, but that it has been getting worse lately~"

"Well, it's mainly because of that girl... Hey! How come you aren't wearing anything?!"

Ryūji's voice got Aisaka to turn around in surprise, even Inko-chan glanced startlingly at Yasuko. As three pairs of eyes stared at her snow white skin, she herself didn't seem to mind...

"Of course~ not, silly. It's supposed to be worn this way~ and then I put this on top~"

Wearing a nearly translucent one-piece dress and twisting her waist, Yasuko was indeed carrying an elegant leopard-spotted jacket in her hand.

"... That dress looks cool!"

"Hee hee, it's cute isn't it? What else do you think, Taiga-chan?"

As Yasuko giggled and waved her skirt, Aisaka simply stared at her without changing her expression. As Ryūji held his breath...

"... There!"

Aisaka pointed her finger towards the centre of Yasuko's buttocks.

"Your panties are showing."

"Wah...! Really!"

Inko-chan quickly replied without hesitation,

"But it's better this way!"

What an idiot. Who on earth would really accept a suggestion from a bird?! As Ryūji fretted his brow, his mother suddenly cheered up. *Oh god, she actually accepted that?!*

Yasuko pulled up her skirt and spun around in a circle with her panties exposed.

"Then I'll be wearing this! I'm off to work!"

She smiled happily while jiggling her voluptuous breasts, and then quickly grabbed the bag of buns that she had bought using the pocket money she had saved up and waved her hand innocently,

"Well, Ryū-chan, Taiga-chan, Ya-chan is going now~"

"Yeah, take care. Don't drink too much, and remember to call with your cell phone if you bump into anyone strange!"

"O~kay~! Taiga-chan, don't go home too late now!"

"Sure, take care."

As the antique door creaked to a close, the Takasu residence was once again sealed off from the outside world.

What's important is, right now, to put it simply...

"Haaa, I'm gonna go get some tea."

"Get me some too, and dessert as well."

"Dessert? Do we have any? Is eating all that matters to you? At least bring something useful from time to time!"

"..."

"Will you stop ignoring me?!"

In case you hadn't noticed, Takasu Ryūji and Aisaka Taiga have now completely gotten used to each other's presence... as well as Ryūji's family. But this can't be helped, in any case, the two were now pretty much living together.

To make sure Aisaka didn't oversleep, each morning Ryūji would go over to her place to fetch her. Bringing along the bentos that he would prepare beforehand, he

would also make a simple breakfast as she finished getting ready herself.

When walking to school, they would leave some distance between each other just before bumping into Minori, while continuing to maintain a suitable space between themselves until they reached school.

At school, they would often discuss various strategies in order to win Kitamura's heart, and then put them into action... Though they had all ended in failure so far.

After school, they would head to the supermarket for some shopping... In the beginning the cooking was done at Aisaka's place, but they quickly ran into a problem: it would be fine if it were just them having dinner, but Yasuko would be left out. If Ryūji only made Aisaka's share, then he would have to cook again when he went home, meaning he would have to cook twice, which would be bothersome. He could cook the whole lot at Aisaka's place and then bring his family's share home, but that was bothersome as well.

So it was decided that the cooking would be done at Takasu's place, and the three of them would eat together, which was what they were doing now. When you think

about it, it was indeed exhausting trying to do things in both places. Though Aisaka's kitchen was sparkling clean , it was unexpectedly difficult to use. The knives were hardly sharp and there weren't enough plates, another reason for Ryūji to feel irritated.

Unexpectedly, Yasuko was quite open to accepting Aisaka, and Aisaka, for her part, wasn't overly curious about Yasuko's eccentricity, she simply came to have dinner. And when it was time for Yasuko to go to work, she and Ryūji would wave and see her off.

In the beginning, Aisaka would go home just after Yasuko had gone to work, but later she began watching TV, reading manga, taking naps, wondering how Kitamura and Kushieda were... And the time she spent in the Takasu residence slowly grew longer...

"... Ah!"

By the time Ryūji noticed, things had become like this.

Wiping the drool off his mouth, he frantically called out to the fellow on the other side of the small table,

"Hey, Aisaka! Get up!"

"... Hmm...?"

While lazily watching TV, they had unknowingly fallen asleep. Ryūji was wearing his tracksuit, while Aisaka was wearing a fluffy one-piece dress as they slept on the tatami... It was already 3am.

"No matter what, it's not that good to sleep at my place , is it? So hurry up and go sleep at your place!"

"... Umm..."

He wasn't even sure whether she had heard him, as she laid her face on the sitting mat, using it as a pillow. Aisaka stuck her hand inside her clothes and began scratching her tummy... *Why you...* Ryūji quickly yanked the mat from under her head.

"Ugh! ... Umm..."

As Aisaka's head knocked onto the tatami, she momentarily opened her eyes. She then moved a bit, as though getting used to the feel of the tatami, shifted into a comfortable position, and began to snore silently once again.

Ryūji squatted down next to her and leaned over to look at her sleeping face... *Such an intimate relationship we're having! Maybe I've come to the age where I can hang out naturally with girls... No! That's not it! She's no ordinary girl , she's the Palmtop Tiger.* But was this girl before his eyes really that Palmtop Tiger who roars so fiercely?

The pattern of the mat was imprinted on her pink cheek, while some warm milk still remained on the edge of her lips. Her long hair was just lying on the tatami like that, there was hardly any tension on that peaceful sleeping face.

"... Hey... Aisaka... Aisaka... wake up!"

Silence. Only the refrigerator motor could be heard in the silent two-room plus kitchen apartment. There was still some time before dawn, when Yasuko would return, and Inko-chan continued to sleep soundly under the cloth with that ugly face of his.

"Aisaka. Taiga!"

As Ryūji's body cast his long shadow on her face, he could see her pulse beating on her neck. Ryūji planned to approach Aisaka's ear and yell at her, so he leaned

forward, but at that moment, his body stiffened. He smelled a strange fragrance, it was coming from Aisaka.

"If you don't wake up... I, I'm going to assault you!"

... Of course I'm not serious. It's not possible. I mean, why would I want to do anything to Aisaka? Besides, I already have someone I like (Minori...) So I never even thought of wanting to do anything to her... Seriously! ... Honest!

But she's too thick-skinned. Since she's not going to wake up, I have to give her a scare... Just to say something to startle her, that's all.

But she continued to remain motionless. He now noticed a small tatami thread on her snow white cheek... *That might cause a scratch* Ryūji thought. *Nothing malicious. .. I'm just concerned... I'll just remove this for her...* Ryūji gulped, and then slowly reached out his hand...

"UMPH!"

He was then sent flying to the other end of the room.

"... Hmm? What... are you doing?"

"... N, nothing..."

If it was a coincidence, then it came too coincidentally. As Aisaka rolled her body over, she had moved her arm as well. Her powerful fist then unintentionally gave Ryūji's chin an uppercut.

Aisaka woke up and scratched her head, she then frowned as she looked suspiciously at Ryūji, who had landed upside down,

"... Strange... just what are you so noisy for? It's the middle of the night. Last thing we want is the landlord to scold us again!"

"L, leave me alone!"

If Aisaka was awake just then, Ryūji would be dead by now. *She's still scary even when she's sleeping...*

Aisaka was indeed the Palmtop Tiger. The savage genes saturated her blood, she was the sort of aggressive high school girl who would bite at any opponent that came at her.

Though he was now quite familiar with her, Takasu Ryūji felt he still needed situations like this to confirm that fact.

* * *

Testimony 1

"This is Haruta Koji from Class 2-C reporting: I really saw it, it happened when I was grabbing a bite on my way home just after club activities had ended, in the supermarket near the station... Those two were definitely Takasu and the Palmtop Tiger! Takasu was carrying a shopping basket and was deciding on which fish to buy when the Palmtop Tiger stuffed a piece of meat into the basket. Takasu quickly yelled at her, 'I thought we're

having steamed fish tonight!' And placed the meat back on the shelf. Then they bought some onions and radishes. As they came to the counter, Takasu said 'take 1000 yen from our common wallet', which was followed by the Palmtop Tiger obediently taking a wallet out. He said ' common wallet'! How can I put this? It just feels like they're a married couple."

Testimony 2

"This is Kihara Maya, also from Class 2-C, reporting: I saw it happen during the morning on the way to school... I usually ride a bike... You know that brand new posh apartment block? Every time I went past there, I would always wonder how great it would be to live there. It was then when I saw Takasu-kun coming out. I then thought, 'No way! He lives here?!' Then I saw Aisaka running after him and muttering 'I'm still sleepy! You should wake me up earlier!' I didn't believe my eyes! I couldn't help but keep watching, and saw Takasu-kun turning around yelling 'I've already called you many times!' ... Could this be... could they be... ?"

Testimony 3

"Um, this is Noto Hisamitsu from Class 2-C. I used to be classmates with Takasu during our first year, and we still hang out often. But lately, Takasu always seems to disappear whenever I want to walk home with him. I can't help but wonder just what has been going on. Just yesterday, since my favourite band had just released their new album, I thought about going to the record store with him, so I went to ask him during lunch... In the end... It's really strange, he told me 'Hang on a moment,' and then turned around and said, 'Aisaka, I can't go home with you today, is that okay? ... I'll be back at 8.' ... This made me curious. Back? To where? And what would he do there? Then, while we were at the record store, I asked him what that was all about, he simply replied, 'Don't worry about it' ... There's definitely something going on!"

Testimony 4

"This is Kushieda Minori of Class 2-C. I guess you can call me a good friend of Taiga, but lately... it seems like she's hiding something from me. Every morning, I meet

her at the same spot before walking together to school, but, how should I put this... Takasu-kun also comes with her... He always appears just a bit behind her, walking as though he doesn't know anything. Does that mean they're 'an item'? Or are they 'sworn to never part'? But Taiga always claims 'We just happen to meet each other on the way,' or 'Really? I didn't even notice.' Umm, though I'm glad Taiga has gotten rid of her bad habit of oversleeping and being late for school every three days, but... I'm really bothered by the feeling that she's hiding something from me. The two of them also look kinda sneaky even at school, god knows just what they're scheming... Huh? Is this feeling called jealousy? Then what will become of the Soeur System? What will become of Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Gigantea? ... And what the hell am I talking about?! Ahhh, even I don't know what I'm saying anymore~!!!"

... Ryūji was still Ryūji. His fierce eyes would often lead to misunderstandings and rumours. But he was already used to, or to be more precise, in order not to get hurt, he learned to ignore what other people said as a defence mechanism.

... Aisaka was still Aisaka. She was the sort of girl that didn't even care about rumours. Basically, she was not interested in anyone besides herself (Minorin and Kitamura were exceptions).

Because these two were "celebrities" to begin with, they were completely unaware of the growing whispers around them.

In the ever restless classroom, their classmates whispered into each other's ears, passing glances at the two and nodding: "... I saw it myself, they both came out of the same building...", "I really saw them in the supermarket the other day...", "There they are whispering again...", "Ah! They've both disappeared!", "Palmtop Tiger called Takasu by his first name", "Takasu sure has guts as well, to be able to casually call her an idiot", "And emerge unscathed as well...", "Even their bentos are the same!"

Could Takasu Ryūji and Aisaka Taiga be...?

"Oh, damn it!"

The tiny Palmtop Tiger gasped, causing everyone else to shudder. *What happened? Has she lost her prey?* Though Aisaka's expression remained unchanged,

"Hey Ryūji! I forgot to tell you something..."

Aisaka walked directly over to Ryūji's desk by the window, ignoring the fact that their classmates sitting around him had begun to lean over and eavesdrop.

"What now?"

"Yesterday..."

Aisaka's voice was getting softer... *I can't hear!* Said the paparazzi as they leaned even closer.

"... forgot to tell you..."

Ryūji grunted and lifted his face while listening to Aisaka's soft voice. She kept on whispering in a voice only Ryūji could hear, while the ears around them tried to receive any signals that came out from their position.

"... not coming home tonight..."

WHAT!? The guys sitting behind Ryūji froze stiff upon hearing that. *What did she just say?* They began to pass notes and transmit to everyone what they had just heard. *She just said she's not coming home tonight!* Everyone fell silent. Ignoring the glances around them, Ryūji replied,

"... staying the night?"

"... Yeah."

"Then... already prepared..."

"... Yeah."

No way! No friggin way! Is this for real!? The whispers swept throughout the classroom. *Hey, hang on, could they be... he said staying the night... and said be prepared...*

"So this means, the Palmtop Tiger is staying over at Takasu's place?"

Swallowing his saliva, the long haired Haruta whispered softly.

"He said be prepared... t, that means... going to bed? Oh boy... this feels wrong..."

Standing just behind Haruta, the four-eyed Noto replied softly as well.

Uwaa~! Some of the girls began to gasp softly. *This could be the first officially known sexual experience of this class!* ... Kihara Maya blushed and proclaimed, "I don't think this is even their first time!" Some of the guys muttered in agony, "Actually I always thought the Palmtop Tiger was kinda cute... And was hoping no one had claimed her..." Others also came in and added, "Me too. When I confessed to her last year, she said as a matter-of-factly that if that was the case, then all guys should go to hell..." More and more decided to voice their opinion.

The whole class turned uniformly towards Ryūji and Aisaka, watching them exchange each other's futures. Aisaka was looking towards the window, so no one could see her expression, while Ryūji fretted his brow, as though he was about to have a duel with someone... most likely Aisaka's father.

"Ku, Kushieda, looks like something big is about to happen to your good pal tonight!"

Kushieda remained silent.

"Kushieda?"

No matter how many times the girls patted her shoulder or poked her with their elbows, she remained motionless, and simply stared at those two.

Though it's not really necessary, I might as well mention what was actually being said:

"Didn't your mom leave without eating anything yesterday? She wanted me to tell you 'I *forgot to tell you*, I'm *not coming home tonight*.' Since it was the bar landlord's birthday, so the birthday party is gonna last till morning,"

"Yasuko's going to stay at the bar? Could she be *staying the night*?"

"*Yeah*, that's what she said,"

"*Then* she must be *already prepared* with having to put up with that old man Inage whining away all night, he just got divorced last year,"

"She said that as well, something about ' *Yeah*, that Inage-san is so and so...' ... AHHH! Dammit! Stop using me as your family's personal messenger!"

"If you don't like it, then stop coming to my place to eat!"

"..."

"How many times do I have to tell you to stop ignoring me?!"

* * *

It was a very normal recess time in Class 2-C. Takasu Ryūji read his manga in his sunlight-drenched desk,

while Aisaka Taiga quietly sipped her box of milk with a bored expression and an aura that seemed to say, "Leave me alone".

Yet a very courageous fellow came and patted Aisaka on her back,

"Hey, Taiga... Are you free now?"

It was none other than Kushieda Minori. *So she's finally going to do it, huh?* ... The whole class was now gazing at the back of the Palmtop Tiger.

"Why such a serious face... Hey! Minorin?!"

Wearing a serious expression unlike her normal ones in the past, Minori dragged Taiga by her collar and pulled her up from her seat. The tiny Aisaka exclaimed,

"I, I can move on my own without you pulling me! I'm gonna fall!"

"Just follow me!"

Apparently Minori was the only person in this world capable of doing such a thing to the Palmtop Tiger. If it were anyone else, they would have been bitten in less

than three seconds. As everyone held their breath, Minori dragged Aisaka on the ground as though she were a piece of luggage and told to the person before her,

"... You. Come along as well!"

"... Huh? ... M, me!?"

The person she pointed at was none other than Takasu Ryūji. He felt a bit ecstatic at being called out... *Though she simply called me "you"...* His eyes squinted a bit at the thought, though no one else could really tell that he was frowning.

The school roof was filled with a tense atmosphere... though it couldn't be seen, but that's what it felt like anyway.

It was a fairly nice day. The clouds slowly floated above in an idyllic manner.

"M, Minorin...?"

"Kushieda?"

After dragging Ryūji and Aisaka here, Kushieda Minori had her back towards them... *Whoosh...* In this unusual situation, the tracksuit jacket that she wore on top of her uniform for some reason, fluttered against the wind.

Ryūji suddenly suppressed his voice and whispered to Aisaka, who was standing 30cm below him,

"Hey... what's going on here?"

"How would I know? ... This is also my first time seeing Minorin look like that... maybe she's angry about something?"

Aisaka looked a bit melancholic and tilted her head uncomfortably, nevertheless she decided to step forward. ..

"U, umm... M, Minorin...?"

As she stretched out her hand, her voice stopped. The whole world seemed to stop as well. Turning around, Minori's eyes seemed to glitter for a while before she suddenly jumped in front of Aisaka.

"Wah?!" Aisaka yelled, shielding herself with her arms. *What's going on?* Minori quietly glided past Aisaka and then...

"TAKASU------KUUUUUNNN----!!!"

"WHOA?!"

Minori slid to just a few meters in front of Ryūji and elegantly knelt down before him.

Amongst the flying dust and fluttering tracksuit jacket...

"I now entrust my Taiga to you! PLEEEAAASEEE----! Take good care of her!!!"

She yelled with a voice that pierced the skies.

"... Huh?! Wha...? EHHHHH?!"

Minori bowed down with her hands on the ground, touching her fingers with her forehead. Ryūji was completely awestruck by all this, as was Aisaka, who struggled to keep her jaw shut.

"Takasu-kun, this girl... Taiga, she's a very important friend of mine. She may have a really bad temper at times, but she's a very kind and gentle girl! ... Please! M, make her happy!!!"

Sob ... All Aisaka could see was Minori sobbing. A second has passed... ten seconds... thirty seconds....

The first one to come to his senses was Ryūji,

"Kushieda, h, hang on a minute... W, what are you talking about...?"

"Please stop saying that!"

Minori lifted her head and looked at Ryūji with a serious expression,

"Stop pretending you don't know anything, all right? Takasu-kun, that's enough already! I know everything now! I'll support you all the way!"

Minori exclaimed that with a clear and determined expression, while staring directly at Ryūji... Ryūji, for his part, was so mesmerized by her decency that he couldn't speak.

"... Do you think I never noticed? Don't you two always walk to school together every day? And I'm always in the way. I've been waaaaiting so long for you to tell me that you two are seeing each other... But! No matter how long I waited, you just wouldn't tell me! That's why!"

"N, No! T, that's not it! T, that's, Kushieda, you've got it all wrong..."

"I just wanna tell you guys to stop sneaking around already! Takasu-kun! Taiga! I already know that you two are seeing each other! I've always wanted to tell you this! "

Minori pointed at Ryūji with her finger while still kneeling, she then smiled cheerfully and bowed deeply again,

"That's right! It can't be wrong! Takasu-kun, you're Taiga's one and only! I definitely won't let anyone else get in your way! So please rest assured and continue dating, okay?!"

Even if you beg me, I... As though being hit by a huge force, Ryūji knelt down wearily, as though his soul was about to abandon him.

The shock left him speechless... even though he wanted to deny it. *I have to deny this!*

"No! Y, you got it all wrong, Minorin! We don't have that sort of relationship!!! Can you at least listen to us first? So please hurry and get up!"

Aisaka leapt in front of Ryūji and started to explain away. Ryūji was moved to the verge of tears... *That's right , there's still Aisaka. She can help the hopeless me explain this misunderstanding.* Ryūji fell on the concrete ground and transmitted this voiceless message.

However...

"Ho ho ho, there's no need to be shy. Congratulations, you two!"

Minori patted her skirt elegantly like a gentleman and glanced silently past Aisaka's shoulder at Ryūji...

"... Takasu-kun, if you make Taiga cry, I'll never forgive you!"

She revealed a very solemn expression.

That doesn't matter! Hold on a minute! It's not what you think! It isn't!!! Ryūji yelled from the bottom of his heart, struggling to say something, to stretch out his hand, to explain to Minori who was now turning around and preparing to walk away... But his throat, his hand, and everything else was paralyzed by the shock, and he was unable to explain to her.

Before a motionless Ryūji, the last remaining hope that he could count on to explain everything - Aisaka - was also knocked out by the slash of a blade. The tiny lifeless body now fell backwards before his eyes, and remained still; blood sputtered out and dyed her body blood red.

"So that's how it is... Hmm, I was wondering whether you guys were going out together! Takasu, I was just about to see you so I came over... But I guess it doesn't matter anymore. Congratulations, both of you! Though I still can't believe that you never told me about this before ."

This was because Kitamura was here as well...

He saw everything from the entrance of the staircase. And after hearing Minori's confession, he misunderstood everything as well as a result.

He approached the tiny corpse lying on the ground, and gave her the finishing blow,

"Aisaka, I leave Takasu in your care. Make sure you cherish each other. Come to think of it, you two sure are a great match!"

And so the two stunned bodies remained on the ground like that, no longer able to get up...

* * *

"Umm, may I please, take your order..."

"..."

"..."

"... E, excuse me, but if you aren't ordering anything..."

"... Some juice will do..."

"... Make that two. Same as hers..."

"... Drinks, is it? Well, the cups are over there, so please help yourself."

After finishing his designated lines, the waiter turned and left. Yet no one at the table got up to get any drinks.

It was around 10 in the evening, in a family restaurant beside the main road. Sitting at a non-smoking table by the window were two corpses...

Though it was still April, the large one was wearing a loose T-shirt, the hair clip that he used while washing his face remained on his head; the small one wore a red checkered blouse and green checkered skirt, on her head was a messy mop of long hair.

Both looked absolutely miserable and wrecked. Unable to say a word, they didn't even blink, they simply allowed time to pass slowly by.

"How... did it... turn out... like this..."

The first to speak was the larger corpse Ryūji. Placing his elbows on the table, he clutched his head and spoke softly,

"D... Did something go wrong? How did Kushieda Minori get the wrong idea..."

Ryūji finally saw a side of Minori he did not know: a very individualistic girl, unable to listen to other people. In other words, she was super egocentric. However, since

she was Aisaka's best friend, it made sense that she had something in common with Aisaka.

"For Kushieda of all people... to misunderstand..."

And to have his crush of one year suddenly kneeling before him... Equally important, however, was that Aisaka also suffered the same blow as he did.

"..."

Aisaka shifted her blank gaze, looking upwards despondently while sitting very near the edge of the sofa. *She'll slide down if she sits like that. Is this really the Palmtop Tiger? Is this really the Tiger of Class 2-C that can kick a guy miles away with just her gaze? The Tiger that roars with such ferocity?* Ryūji began to feel genuinely sorry...

"A, Aisaka... pull yourself together..."

Ryūji stretched his arm across the table and shook Aisaka's tiny shoulder, but...

"..."

Aisaka's soul still had not returned.

"Aisaka..."

Using up the remainder of his energy, Ryūji fell exhaustedly onto the table. *Really... why did this happen?!*

He should have already been used to feeling hurt.

Whether he was being misunderstood or giving the wrong impression, he should have been used to all this since kindergarten.

"... Ahh, that's it..."

Ryūji then realized why he was so shocked. It wasn't because he was misunderstood, it was because even after being misunderstood, what he received were cheerful smiles and serious words of encouragement instead... as a result, he was unable to properly explain himself and that was really why he was so frustrated.

I'm such an idiot! Ryūji cursed at himself. *It's only to be expected... Even though she never really did fancy me, and I never really did do anything to win her heart. Just what was I expecting?! Perhaps I don't even have a right to feel dejected?*

After remaining in that state for a few minutes, he raised his head, noticing something...

"Ah..."

The sound of two glasses being placed on the table.

"... This is yours. I didn't know what you wanted, so, anyway... it's Peach West Indies, it's got plenty of vitamin C..."

Aisaka had silently gotten up from her seat, and had brought back two large glasses of red juice. After setting the glasses on the table, she slid back into her seat.

"... Aisaka..."

When did she start breathing again? Aisaka released a deep sigh in front of Ryūji. Sitting upright, she lifted her head and said,

"I'm sorry, it's because we're always sticking with each other... It's all because I always wanted to do it my way that it ended up like this... Always wanting Ryūji to get involved... For a hopeless master like me, I have no right to call you a stupid dog..."

Only her eyes maintained her usual sharpness. Although she said that, she seemed exhausted, and the glitter in her eyes lacked its usual luster.

A stone fell in the bottom of Ryūji's heart.

Aisaka feels the same. It's because we're always together that we got misunderstood and hurt! Whether it was Aisaka or me, we both got involved thoroughly. And because of that, always facing each other, always together...

However...

"... Well... I don't really mind... us being... together..."

Ryūji wanted to say something, but decided to give up . *Aisaka is also hurting inside! That's why... I can't just talk to her in a confident mood...* This time Aisaka spoke,

"I've... decided."

Playing with the ice in the drink with her straw, she lifted her head and looked straight at Ryūji with a pair of determined eyes,

"Tomorrow, I'll just go and confess to Kitamura-kun. There'll be no room for foolish errors. I'm going to use the most straightforward... and normal way to confess."

Even though her eyes betrayed her insecurity, she still added, "I've decided."

The one gasping for air was actually Ryūji.

"... Aisaka... why... so sudden... No, right now you've hardly even had any progress with him..."

"That's right. There's no progress at all, not to mention. .."

He misunderstood us, and I got you dragged in as well... She said that in a very soft voice,

"... Which is why, I want to put an end to this."

"An end? What do you mean..."

"Put an end to us 'being together all the time'."

She concluded.

After finishing, Aisaka's eyes turned clear, though her expression looked cold as though she had just fallen into a pool of water. Ryūji was speechless.

"You're free from today onwards! In this case, you can do whatever you like... I won't do anything. If you want to confess to Minorin or whatever, go ahead! ... No matter how my confession tomorrow ends up, you no longer have to listen to me."

"...!"

"Your work as a dog ends today. From tomorrow onwards, we'll go back to our old selves... back to before the love letter!"

An emancipation declaration.

He no longer had to listen to her.

He was supposed to be happy for this moment!

Even then, Ryūji said nothing.

He could at least have said "Thanks for the company" or "Finally, a time to celebrate" or something like that. But he said nothing. Not even "Things will be lonely

from now on"... absolutely nothing. Ryūji's brain could not come up with anything, all he could do was hold onto the icy glass... Even though his fingers were already beginning to get stung by the chill of the ice, even though his heart was now as cold as winter.

Yet for some reason Aisaka smiled... she smiled silently. Looking at Ryūji, she turned her eyes away from him abashedly and covered her mouth with her hands as she lowered her head,

"... It's very strange, why did we end up together like this? Even today, when we didn't even make any appointments! Two walking zombies who just naturally end up meeting here... Eating together every day... Constantly goofing off together or quarelling together..."

A small laugh emanated from her little hands, while her eyes squinted into crescent moon shapes. Aisaka was really laughing, the first time Ryūji had seen her laughing from the heart.

"I... don't want to go home, I don't want to go back to that place where it's just me alone, so I always barged into your place and even ate there, this is really... umm, very..."

Aisaka stopped what she was trying to say and shrugged silently. *Just what is she up to?* She shifted her gaze casually and then closed her eyes, as though carefully sealing away all that her eyes had seen, very gently, not making a single sound.

"It's... haha, how should I say this? But... umm, that's right, good thing I didn't starve to death. Um, I'm really clumsy, aren't I? You noticed that I live alone, right?"

Aisaka probably didn't see Ryūji nod.

"It's a cruel story. I didn't get along very well with my parents, and we were always arguing. One day I said 'I'm leaving this house', and they simply said 'Go ahead'. And then they gave me this apartment... Before I realized it, I was already thinking of moving out... But, I was too proud to take back what I said... And by the time I moved in, I discovered I couldn't do any housework... It's such a pain, really! There hasn't been one, not a single person who has come to see me... What's really stupid is that even when I knew my parents were those sort of people, I still insisted on moving out. Pretty dumb, huh? So go ahead and laugh! I won't get angry anymore."

Aisaka opened her eyes.

After saying all that in one go, Ryūji knew that her shoulders must have worn out already.

What the hell is this? Ryūji's made a grunt in the bottom of his throat.

I mean, what the hell is this?! This simple story that Aisaka told... isn't it one of those tragic stories of abandonment? Isn't this like a doll that got left alone in a castle after being abandoned by the king and his family?

But Aisaka was laughing, and it seemed like she was hoping Ryūji would laugh along as well. So...

"Heh... ha ha!"

That's why...

"Heh heh heh! Hahaha! Yeah, that's pretty dumb..."

"Told you so!"

Ryūji laughed, though his heart felt like it was being torn apart, he still tried his best to laugh happily and gently... Because no one had ever wished so strongly for him to laugh before.

It'll all end today. Everything will revert back to how they were before, from tomorrow onwards - Not even bothering to greet, back to being the Palmtop Tiger that no one dares to approach, back to having a terrifying classmate known as the Palmtop Tiger.

If that was the case, then he might as well laugh all he could now, and carefully observe Aisaka's last ever smile in this blandly decorated family restaurant.

Then, I might as well show her! I'm sure she'll laugh like hell after seeing that.

"Hahah, oh yeah, let me show you something interesting. You know who this is?"

That was an old photo he placed in his wallet.

"Huh? Ah... could this be... your dad?!"

"Bingo! You got it!"

"Pft! Wahahahahahaha!" A loud laughter that attracted the gazes of everyone around,

"Wha, what is this? You look just like him! Ahahaha! Man, that's so funny!"

"Look around his eyes... we're a match right? Me and this thug!"

"Enough already! Stop showing me that! Ahahahahahahaha!!!"

Twitching and holding back her tears, Aisaka lay on the table laughing, banging on it with her hands, kicking wildly with her legs. She continued to laugh even as her voice became hoarse. The perfectly inherited gangster face seemed to have triggered something within Aisaka. If the inherited feature for which he so despised could make her this happy, then perhaps it was something worth having after all.

"... I've never shown anyone this photo before."

"Ha, haha, man...! I don't think I've ever laughed this much before... How did you manage to get such genes?!"

"It's fun, right?"

"You bet! Ahh! That's right! As a token of gratitude for showing me your secret, let me also tell you something interesting as a reward... I'll tell you my secret."

"You know..." She said sneakily, covering her mouth to prevent her laughter from coming out; Aisaka's cheeks puffed crimson red while her eyes glittered like a prankster. She gestured Ryūji to come over as she whispered into his ear,

"... Those cookie crumbs were salty, weren't they?"

"Wha?!"

Her soft voice got Ryūji yelling. *How? How did she know what they taste like...*

"Heh heh! Actually when I retrieved the cookies, I gobbled one up out of frustration! You know what? They tasted horrible! But you didn't even let me stop you, and you ate them all in one go... and you even lied to me..."

She suddenly came out with such a revelation.

As Aisaka held her breath, even her smile became sad as she tried to look for words that she seemed to have lost. Sighing, she lowered her head and covered her expression,

"You... Ryūji, as a dog, you're a very stupid dog. But as a human... you're just about right! That's why... that's

why I know, so let's end this... You're not a boring guy, our relationship, how should I say it... isn't a master and servant one, but one as equals..."

"You probably don't get what I'm saying anyway!" She added.

She suddenly stopped talking, when she raised her head again, Aisaka was back to her usual cold expression ...

"I'm feeling hungry again." She said as she opened the menu, Ryūji did the same. They both ordered a hamburger steak dinner. "The steaks that you make definitely taste better!" They would then have their usual conversation, and then argue over who should head to the bar to get some drinks - of course it ended with Ryūji having to go. And then... their limited time together began to tick away by every minute and every second...

Time flows equally for everybody, with no pause whatsoever.

After paying the bill, the two walked along in the dark towards their apartments.

There's something magical about the night temperature in spring, the dreamy wind blows softly on the skin, causing it to itch. Ryūji could not bring himself to stop talking, and Aisaka was also unusually talkative.

For the duration of the twenty minute walk, Aisaka constantly rambled away... about how her mother was now living in some faraway city, how terrible her stepmother was, and how she was part of the reason Aisaka had chosen to move out.

Ryūji talked about living together with his mother, about how poor they were and how they were constantly ridiculed, as well as the creep that kept stalking Yasuko. He also mentioned about how he often got misunderstood thanks to his intimidating looks, he even spoke about the daily embarrassing stuff experienced through puberty.

Ryūji had never told anyone else about these personal woes, maybe it was because Aisaka too had told him about her personal problems... *Am I right?* Though he didn't ask that question as it was too intimate, but that was what he thought.

And then there were those happier days, and they lamented how time flew by too fast.

Still, no one can stop time from moving forward. It would flow slowly, and finally...

"... Ahhh, dammit!"

Under an electric pole in the street corner.

The unlucky pole had become the target for Aisaka to vent her frustration. *Whack! Pong!* The destructive attack went on and on. *Looks like she's drunk!*

"This is so unfair! ... Why must this world be so cruel to us little people?! Who can understand just how frustrated we are?!"

That tormented voice echoed throughout the residential area in the dark. Ryūji didn't stop her, and instead simply stood by Aisaka nodding approvingly,

"That's right! Damn right! Nobody knows that people with scary looks like me and Aisaka can also get depressed!"

"Ahh, this pisses me off... so pissed off! Pissed, pissed, I'm so friggin' pissed!!!"

She performed a series of kicks which a normal person wouldn't be able to pull off, then panted and turned her head suddenly,

"... Hey Ryūji! You feel troubled whenever you think of Minorin, right? Thinking about how there's no progress between you two, and what you should do to get together with her, right? You get all frustrated thinking of that, right?"

"Yeah, maybe!"

He only really started to begin thinking about that question after giving his answer. *Come to think of it, I was always worrying about how to pass each day peacefully with Aisaka that I was too exhausted to even think about the torment in my heart...*

"Then, does Ryūji ever... cry?"

"... Do you?"

"Yeah."

Silence quickly engulfed them.

Aisaka lifted her head and stared into the night sky, moving away from the pole. She waved her messy hair, revealing her snow white face, which was clear and delicate.

"I've been thinking about all these things today... Whether I'll ever get close to him, or whether he already has a girlfriend... And, I think about other stuff... just like an idiot, thinking of many, many things... Probably no one will ever know... No one will ever understand me... No one..."

Her voice was now as soft as a mosquito, and although Ryūji couldn't hear properly, he felt as though the cloudy night sky had been silently engulfed by that lonely voice.

"... If everyone knew what kind of person you are, they would definitely be surprised!"

Ryūji also looked towards the sky, seeking for the moon while saying,

"Who would have guessed that even you would cry over such a thing? ... Only me, only I know."

"How shameless," Aisaka quipped. She sighed as her gaze wandered,

"... Ryūji, you're the same as me! No one understands you, except me, and I know quite a lot as well."

"What are you talking about?! ... Like what?"

"... Though Ryūji may look like that, he doesn't even dare talk to the girl he likes most; though he looks like that, he doesn't even know how to get angry with anyone ; though he looks like that, he's definitely not the type to hurt anyone; though he looks like that, he's actually very good at cooking... And though his eyes look so scary that no one would dare approach him, he's actually a very considerate person... Am I right?"

"I never knew I was so hopeless."

"... You call that hopeless? ... I don't think so..."

Under the gentle spring breeze, Aisaka's hair now fluttered softly like a cloth. She held onto her hair with her fingers, while saying something softly with her lips:

You're actually a very gentle person.

"Aisaka..."

Am I just a boring nice guy? He originally wanted to reply, but he couldn't say anything, because Aisaka's face seemed to be twisting in pain.

"... I, I'm just the exact opposite of you. I'm such a useless person, I'm not good at being gentle, and there are many things I don't know... Or I should say, there just aren't many things that I approve of! Anything that gets in my way, should, just, scram! All of them! All! Of! Them! ..."

Lifting the edge of her skirt, she stuck out her pure white legs and began kicking away...

"... I... AM... SO... PISSED...!!!"

She gave the icy cold electric pole a finishing blow. Ryūji was scared silly by this sudden burst of emotion and began to back away. *Yikes!* He muttered and thought , besides protecting this ferocious tiger, there was nothing else he could do.

"Dammit, dammit, dammit! What Palmtop Tiger?! Do they... seriously think... I wouldn't give a damn???!!! WHY?! Why doesn't anyone understand~???!!!"

The yellow moon appeared above them, as though summoned by the howls of the tiger.

The shadow of Aisaka abusing the electric pole lengthened on the cold tarmac road. Ryūji simply stood and watched, and then as he moved slightly closer to shorten the distance, his shadow too elongated.

Their shadows overlapped, though they did not actually come into contact with each other.

"Everyone... Every, single, one... pisses me off! ... That idiot Minorin! ... Why wouldn't she listen to me?! Same for Kitamura-kun! Why does everyone have to believe her?! Why won't anyone try to understand me?! Minorin, Kitamura-kun, everyone! ... All of them, even my parents , everyone, I... I'll never forgive them! Because, nobody, understands me! ... Nobody! Understands! Me!"

Aisaka wrapped the pole with her arms and kept knocking it with her knees until she could speak no more . *She must've been tormented to the point of tears many times before, so much so that she must have choked on the tears swelling up in her throat and...*

"Ugh, Uggghhh...!"

"Hey! Stop it, you idiot!"

She leaned backwards, preparing to use all she had to make a headbutt... Ryūji managed to stop her forehead with his palm in the nick of time. *There's no way a forehead can beat an electric pole!*

"But I'm just so pissed!"

She cried, this time with tears as well.

Aisaka had now become an innocent child who could not stop crying in the spring night. *Oh boy!* Ryūji decided he had made up his mind... sort of. Though he wasn't capable of doing something incredible, he could at least do something more useful than saying empty words like "I know how you feel". That's why...

"... Let me help you!"

He took a deep breath, and with all his strength as he puffed out his breath,

"THIS. PISSES. ME. OFFFFF~!!!!!"

A person who was not used to kicking things had now joined in, he even did a few spinning kicks. Using

techniques he had seen in K-1 tournaments, Ryūji's kicks shook the electric pole with his unreliable balance.

Ryūji and Aisaka probably looked despicable right now, attacking the pole together. This was because Ryūji had an enemy, and this enemy was like a rock getting in the way of his life, and Ryūji could clearly feel the threat it emanated. Aisaka too had an enemy... sort of. The same enemy that stands between her and her life truly exists. When Aisaka liked someone, or wished to be with someone, this enemy would appear and reveal its weight . Perhaps this enemy can be called "low self-esteem", or " fate", or "genetics", or "environment" or so on, it could even be called "self awareness during puberty" or " something one can't do alone". This enemy carries all sorts of names.

No matter what, it was impossible to try and defeat this enemy, and they had no idea how many times they would have to do battle with this shapeless enemy in the future. If they did not savagely kick the electric pole now, they probably wouldn't be able to vent their anger. They could have chosen to take it out on a wall or a bedsheet... but it seemed like this was the electric pole's unlucky day .

Ryūji decided to help based on that reason alone. No matter how stupid they were, or how foolish they were, or how bored they were, they had now transformed into savage beasts attacking ferociously while howling away in the spring night.

Aisaka's enemy looked especially bigger and heavier than Ryūji's... At least that's what Ryūji thought. *Now I get it. You became a tiger in order to protect yourself from this unseen enemy.* The pole now seemed to grow bigger, heavier, harder, and more difficult to strike down. *Aisaka always hoped to have the power to fight against this enemy, that's why she had to become a tiger.*

Amazing. Though Ryūji and Aisaka were still young, there was one thing they had in common. This was why Ryūji understood Aisaka so much. Whenever he saw her looking exhausted or starving to death, he just couldn't leave her alone.

No matter how annoyed, or how pissed he became, the truth was he just couldn't abandon her.

"Ryūji, move off!"

"Why'd you pick up that bat from the lawn... Whoa!"

Ryūji was startled by Aisaka suddenly lifting her head, and all thought vanished from his mind at the sight of her face.

There was a smile on her face, a very bitter smile. Glaring venomously, the Palmtop Tiger stared at her prey with a mood to kill...

"Take this!"

That sort of mood.

She walked some distance away to the end of the path, and then lifting up the edge of her skirt...

"Just you wait! Kitamura-kun! I'm going to confess to you right nooooowwww!!!"

The audience (Ryūji) gasped. After an explosive run, she did a flying kick with perfect timing: Her tiny body flew elegantly, and under the illumination of the moonlight, stretched out her right leg and aimed it towards the pole.

"...!"

Ryūji couldn't help but close his eyes at the sight of such an exaggerated scene, and did not open them until he heard a loud thud of something landing on the ground. He then ran towards Aisaka, who had fallen beside the pole on her bottom.

"Idiot! Your leg..."

"... Ryūji, look!"

"Hmm?"

Aisaka pointed at the pole sticking up towards the sky. *What about it?* Ryūji turned to face Aisaka again, and saw her smiling triumphantly,

"Don't you think it's tilted now?"

"What?! That's not possible! How can it tilt just by someone kicking it..."

Ryūji glanced at the barbed wire beside the fence, and was quickly overcome by horror,

"... Damn, it's really tilted!"

"Told you!"

Yes! I win! Aisaka smiled to herself. Of course, it was possible that the pole was tilted to begin with; or maybe the barbed wire was crooked all along. Instead of Aisaka kicking the pole off balance, those two possibilities just sounded more plausible.

But Ryūji believed her...

He believed that the pole had indeed been bent by Aisaka the Palmtop Tiger.

Because she was smiling, after all.

"... Shoot, is that a cop?"

Maybe it was because they were too noisy, as they saw a silhouette riding a bicycle heading in their direction. It was indeed a uniformed policeman. Ryūji frantically turned to Aisaka,

"This is bad, let's get the hell outta here! Huh... what's wrong? You okay?!"

Ryūji looked at the fool who simply sat there without moving.

"It hurts..."

"No way!"

Aisaka still looked very pumped up from when she attacked the pole. Now she sat with the edges of her skirt spread out, rubbing her right knee with her tiny hand. She looked at Ryūji with a hopeless expression,

"I think, I may have injured myself during the kick... Ow!"

Her mouth formed an inverted V-shape. *Oh dear!* Ryūji scratched his head,

"Isn't that obvious?! Jeez... it seems to have swollen up. .."

Ryūji knelt down in order to look more carefully and fretted his brow. Under the dimly lit streetlamp, he could clearly see on top of the tiny leg, a red lump on that white skin.

"... The pole must be very hard... Ow...!"

"Of course it is! Really..."

Ryūji sighed deeply. *You're hopeless.* He then knelt with his back towards her... *I guess this is what they call chivalry.* He seemed to be enjoying the feeling as well.

"Come, I'll carry you. Hey, wait... UMPH!"

He was looking forward to carrying her, but he forgot one thing: she was the Palmtop Tiger after all. Despite the pain in her leg, she still managed to leap up with a great force and land on Ryūji's back. She also held tightly onto Ryūji's neck, causing him to nearly suffocate.

"I... I can't... breathe..."

Ryūji frantically slapped on Aisaka's hand, which was pressed against his windpipe and artery, trying to tell her that his life was in danger.

"Oh no, Ryūji! Isn't that a cop? We'd better run!"

Didn't I already point that out a while ago?! ... Since his throat was being strangled and unable to talk, Ryūji had no choice but to start running.

Taking the long route into a quiet alley, Ryūji ran silently in the dark. They came to a small alley devoid of illumination. In the surreal silence, neither said a word.

Sensing each other's warmth, they didn't even convey how scared they felt to each other.

Ryūji was indeed carrying Aisaka on his back.

Aisaka's chin softly rubbed against the rapidly beating pulse on Ryūji's neck.

Without speaking, she simply pointed ahead, towards a traffic light which was barely visible at the end of the alley...

"OW!"

Clang! A low smashing sound resonated; Aisaka gave a yelp.

"What? What happened?!"

Ryūji quickly stopped and turned to look at Aisaka on his back. Feeling her breathing very closely, they exchanged glances in the dark,

"T, there seems to be a road sign... and I bumped my forehead into it."

"Wha?! Why didn't you dodge it?!"

"It was too sudden! And I can't see anything in this darkness! Did you not see anything either?! ... Ouch, dammit..."

"Where'd it hit you? Over here?"

Ryūji stretched his hand and touched Aisaka's burning forehead - since it was pointless to look in such darkness.

"... Doesn't seems to be bleeding, and there's no lump... I think you'll be fine."

"How unlucky."

"This has got nothing to do with luck, you're just too stupid."

"What did you say?!" Ryūji quickly carried Aisaka, who was protesting and catching her breath, and started running again. Once they reached the main road, they wouldn't be far from home.

"... It's good that you weren't hurt."

As the sound of a police whistle blowing could be heard some distance away, the person riding on Ryūji's back probably couldn't hear his muttered words.

"You have to confess your feelings tomorrow. It'll be bad if you scratch your face... so it's ok!"

Aisaka said nothing.

It's good...

He felt Aisaka's soft cheek pressing on his neck... riding on his back without any injury. *That's good... As long as she stays like this, it'll be fine.*

After making sure the police bike wasn't pursuing them, they finally emerged from the small alley and returned to the dazzling light from the streetlamps of the main road. As they walked, they crossed paths with commuters returning home after the day's work, as well as some old ladies walking their dogs. Everyone was busy in their own way, and didn't bother to look at Ryūji and Aisaka. Whether it was commuters, blue collars, old ladies, or old geezers, everyone had their own enemy to fight against, and they probably all wanted to have a night where they could kick the crap out of an electric pole. Though the reason they didn't do that was because they were all grown up.

Suddenly, the image of all those people taking their frustration out on the electric pole popped into Ryūji's head, and he couldn't help but laugh to himself, which Aisaka noticed and asked,

"What're you laughing at?"

Aisaka stuck out her head, her breath landing right on Ryūji's cheek.

"Nothing... just something useless."

"Eh?! What is it? Come on! Tell me!"

"UGH!"

His neck was being strangled.

"W, why you..."

"Cause I'm curious! Just what're you laughing at?"

"... Like I said, it's nothing important, so don't worry about... I... I can't breathe!"

"If you don't want to say it, then I'll make sure you won't be able to for the rest of your life."

Seriously... how can people like this exist? Ryūji wondered while keeping his windpipe clear so he could argue with her. *As a tyrannical tiger, she's forceful, violent, selfish and obnoxious. Just how many times have I suffered thanks to spending time with her? There's that time, and that time, and that...*

Come to think of it... those pains seem to have mellowed as I think more about them. There's probably no emotion under that warm body of hers right now. Even as we approach that Bourgeoisie-style apartment block, she probably won't have any change in emotion like always...

However...

The arms that held onto his neck suddenly loosened.

"You can drop me off here."

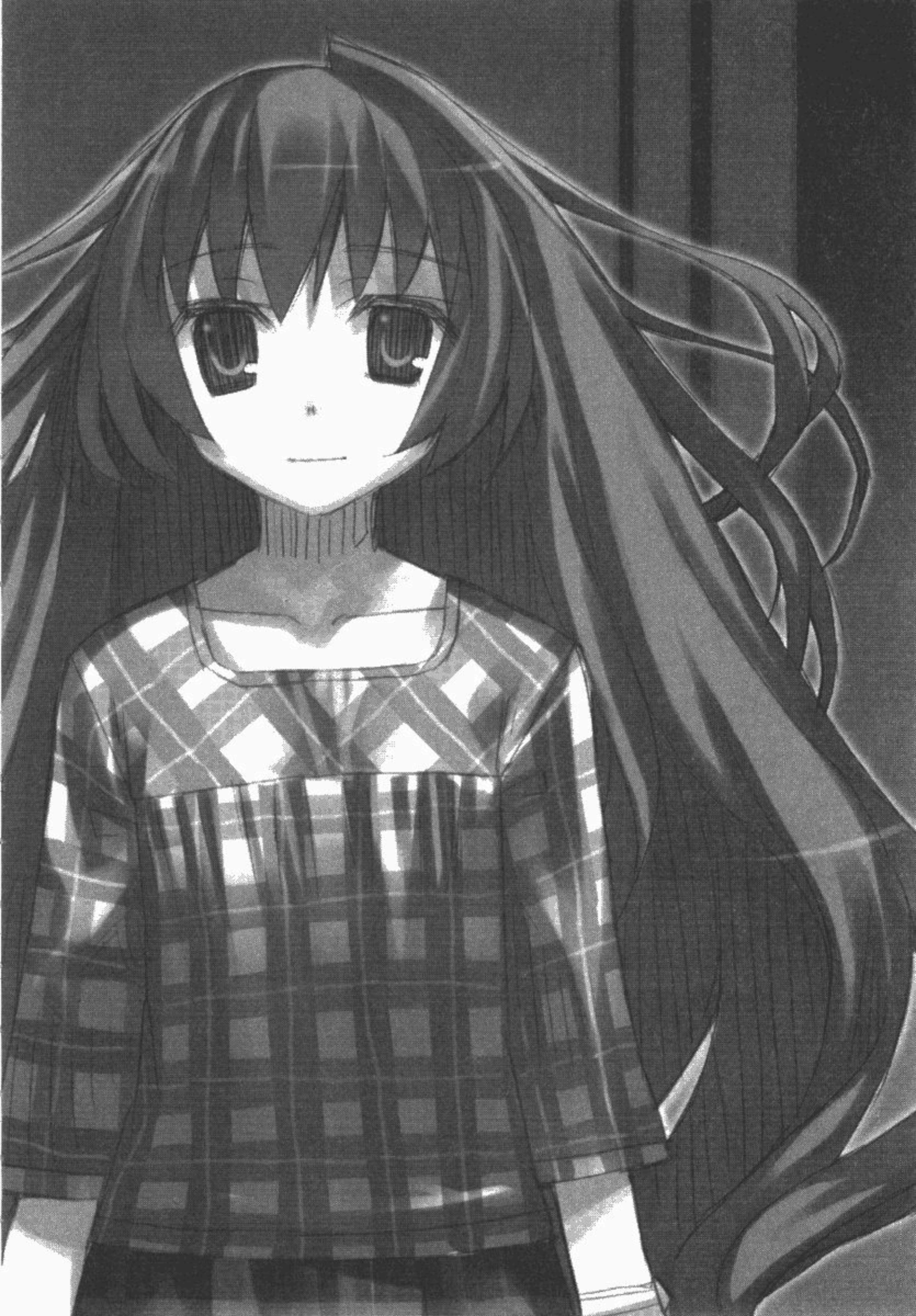
Aisaka said, tapping on Ryūji's shoulder.

In front of the apartment block entrance, Aisaka elegantly leapt off Ryūji's back. As his back became free

of the burden, Ryūji felt the weight disappearing, but he also felt the warmth disappearing. As everything disappeared, Ryūji turned to look at Aisaka standing before the glass door.

He then felt his heart hurting as though it were being blocked... *So it really hurts.*

"This is it, Ryūji. And we're just in time, look!"



She lifted her tiny hand and showed him her watch. The two hands on the face of the watch pointed exactly at 11:59.

"Ahh, I'm so tired... At least we made it home peacefully. It all ends today, right now. After today, you'll no longer be my dog. There's thirty seconds left... Hey, do you have anything to say before then?"

"... Anything to say... what do you mean?"

"You do have some last words to say as my stupid dog , don't you, Ryūji?"

"... Well... to suddenly ask me to say something..."

Standing two meters before him, Aisaka smiled, at least she looked like she was smiling. She tilted her tiny neck, as though expecting Ryūji to speak. *But what could I say... what could I say...*

"... Ten seconds... Five seconds..."

He couldn't say anything.

A breeze blew between the two. Aisaka lowered her hand and said,

"Goodbye."

"Yeah... S, see you tomorrow! And good luck!"

That was all he said.

"Goodbye, Takasu-kun."

Chapter 6

He overslept.

Though the ingredients for breakfast and the bentos had been prepared, he had forgotten to turn on the stove.

He forgot to feed Inko-chan and change his water as well.

Because he was in a hurry when leaving, he later discovered that his socks were mismatched...

"... J, just what the hell am I doing, really..."

Ryūji muttered to himself as he looked down towards his feet - the right sock was black while the left was deep blue.

It was only when he arrived at the shoe locker by the school entrance to change into his indoor shoes that he discovered this regrettable error. There was nothing he could do now, even though the error was glaringly obvious. *The colors are so different, how on earth did I manage to mix them up?*

But he had no time to think as it was getting late. The dean stood by the stairs ushering the students into their classrooms. Ryūji nodded obligingly, trying not to provoke him. Unfortunately, he did not expect himself to trip as he climbed the stairs, missing the last step and hitting his shin, causing him to squint his strict-looking eyes in pain. For some reason, the lower classmen all shuddered at the sight of that when passing through.

As he sighed and rubbed his shin, he thought of one thing - the reason he felt so low was probably because of what happened last night when he parted ways with Aisaka.

Ryūji was supposed to feel relieved at being liberated from the troublesome mornings and from having to go through the pain of making an extra bento; he was supposed to have gone back to that comfortable life from before --- but now he was a terrible mess --- *I guess this temporarily messed up life won't go back to normal so easily!* When he considered that he might have become used to living his life as a dog, he couldn't help but feel pathetic. Yet for some reason, he didn't feel as spirited as before without those yells every morning.

How's Aisaka doing? Ryūji limped slowly while thinking of useless stuff. *Could she get up on her own without me calling her? Is she late? Did she bring her own bento?* (Though he thought of that, he himself went to buy food from the convenience store.)

What's the point of thinking about these things?! He cast away those thoughts in self-pity, and opened the classroom door. As he was about to enter...

"...Whoa?!"

He exclaimed and backed off, closing the door along the way.

What on earth happened just now?

He returned alone to the corridor. *Anyway, breathe deeply. Heave... ho... OK, I've calmed down. Lemme think. What did I just see a moment ago? What could have caused this to happen?*

He couldn't think of an answer no matter how hard he tried, he had to go inside to confirm for himself. Taking a gulp, Ryūji once again put his hand on the door handle, and carefully slid the door open.

"... Do I make myself clear?"

Ryūji was stunned.

He felt a deep foreboding voice entering his ear with an intent to kill. *Dissenters will be killed without mercy!* Determined words that struck down everyone on sight.

"If I ever hear anyone saying something useless again... I'll. Definitely. Make. Him. Pay!"

Standing in the center of the classroom, with her back towards Ryūji was Aisaka Taiga - also known as the Palmtop Tiger.

Surrounding her were a bunch of her classmates struggling to keep their distance from her while hugging the walls, all nodding their heads vigorously.

What's going on here? Besides this question, Ryūji could think of nothing else to say, no matter how many times he repeated it... *What's going on here??*

"... I hope I've made myself clear. I do not like to repeat myself..."

The tiny tiger repeated. "Yessir...!" Everyone, both the guys and girls, replied feebly, shuddering in fear.

Upon closer inspection, the desks and chairs around Aisaka were all thrown over, the bags and their various contents were scattered everywhere. The whole classroom looked terrible, resembling a wreckage that just got devastated by a passing typhoon. Though Aisaka's voice was calm, her shoulders trembled exhaustingly, as though she had just yelled loudly. *Could she have... No, I can't be wrong, this has to be Aisaka's work. But, why?*

"Oh... Takasu..."

Someone's noticed me. Yes, I am indeed Takasu, but...

"...W, what happened? ... What is it?"

Why is everyone looking at me with such a weird expression ? Though it's a good thing it's not one of contempt, but they look uncomfortable, or is it embarrassed? Anyway, they're all looking at me with such a strange expression.

And then Aisaka turned her head as well and silently exchanged glances with him, she didn't even say good

morning. Instead, she lifted her chin ambiguously, and simply told the whole class "Dismissed."

Their trembling classmates who were huddled together began to return to their seats in groups of twos and threes. One of them came towards Ryūji.

"... T, Takasu... I, I'm terribly sorry. It's all because of our strange rumors..."

"Huh? Strange rumors?"

"I'm so sorry, we'll never imagine such weird things again!"

"... Wha? Imagine what? Just what are you trying to say?"

Even Noto, who normally got along well with him, said,

"... Hey Takasu,... Now I'm not thinking of anything funny here, I just genuinely think that you're an amazing fellow... and I guess I'm a bit envious as well! I'm so sorry , I'll never think of anything strange ever again!"

He said with a nervous expression on his face, as he was about to walk away, Ryūji grabbed him by the shoulder, and frantically inquired as to what he meant,

"J, just hold on a second! What the hell are you talking about? What on earth just happened? This is Aisaka's doing, right? What has she done this time?"

"No, well..."

"You explain this at once!"

Noto's expression looked quite embarrassed, his eyes were shifting everywhere. Noto was one of the few friends not intimidated by Ryūji's eyes, even when being questioned by him. Nevertheless, Ryūji could not let go of Noto's shoulders, he was not letting go until he got an answer... Noto understood this as well, so he responded vaguely, "Well, how should I say this?"

"It's like... we kind of eavesdropped... we were spreading gossip about you and the Palmtop Tiger..."

"Gossip?"

"Well... yeah, gossip about... you two dating each other ... In the end, the Palmtop Tiger went ballistic because of this. She said 'I have no relationship whatsoever with Takasu-kun!' And then all hell began to break loose... That was just too scary, really... This was the first time I actually saw the Palmtop Tiger wreaking havoc. I'll never go against her will again. She then added 'No more nonsense! No more premature conclusions! If anyone dares to spread that gossip around again, I'll kill them! Each and every one of them!' Not even Kushieda could stop her... Right, Kushieda?"

Noto called out to Kushieda Minori, who just happened to pass by... Normally, she was supposed to be the only person who knew the Palmtop Tiger well, but now her face lacked it's usual sunshine-like smile.

"U...umm, Takasu-kun, I..."

Her solemn eyes seemed to be considering something as she looked at Ryūji's eyes... *She looks as though she wants to say something.* And then...

"... Minorin, don't spew any more useless nonsense, or I'll get mad, even at you---"

Aisaka promised forcefully behind her.

"Minorin, you must apologize to Takasu-kun as well... Tell him that you know that it was all a misunderstanding yesterday... You must apologize sincerely! This is all thanks to those classmates spreading these rumors... Because I want Minorin of all people to know that this is all a misunderstanding."

"... Taiga."

"Say it, Minorin!"

Aisaka's mouth turned into an inverted-V shape as she became more and more agitated like a child. Her eyes glared straight into Minori without flinching or looking at Ryūji, while her brows were locked in place.

Minorin remained speechless for quite some time, and simply received Aisaka's glare. In the end she was completely defeated, and said "All right" while turning to Ryūji once again,

"Takasu-kun, I'm sorry I misunderstood you yesterday ."

"... W, well... t, there's not really... any need to apologize..."

"Taiga...!"

Ryūji's crush now revealed a pair of troubled eyes. Even though she had apologized to Ryūji, she still showed a face of dissatisfaction,

"... It was Taiga that told me to say that. She wanted me to tell you that I know this is all just a misunderstanding. But... I can't believe Taiga would actually do something like this..."

"Or perhaps..." As she was about to continue, the delicately balanced mood was broken...

"Whoa?! What the hell's up with this mess?! I can't believe that the order of the classroom has been messed up this badly even though your class-rep was only a little late!"

Kitamura arrived with a show of pomposity. Minori swallowed what she was about to say and left Ryūji

behind and gave a slap on the back of Aisaka's head, " Don't look so gloomy!" She said, going back to her usual cheery demeanor before returning to her desk.

Afterwards, under the instructions of the completely oblivious Kitamura, everyone began to tidy up the messed up desks and tables.

"C'mon! Hurry up folks! If Koigakubo sees this, she's gonna be so shocked that she could delay her wedding!"

Under Ryūji's gaze, he saw Aisaka walking towards Kitamura. Standing at a very close distance from him, she said something which only he could hear.

Kitamura instantly revealed a puzzled expression, before quickly reverting back to his happy-go-lucky smile and nodded to Aisaka.

Ryūji saw Aisaka's lips say - *I have something to say to you. See you after school.* - Or something like that.

She said things smoothly this time. She didn't stutter due to nervousness, she didn't even trip, nothing else happened. Aisaka had finally succeeded in calling Kitamura out, and without help from any dog.

* * *

So ended another day for the seemingly strange Class 2-C. In fact, Ryūji's eyes never left Kitamura and Aisaka.

When the hopeless single lady clad in her trendy red dress left the classroom after the class had sent her off at the end of lessons, the classroom became lively once again. There were people rushing off for club activities, people going to meetings, people waiting to go home together, people continuing their conversations from before the end of class - as well as people who exchanged glances and walked out of the classroom together.

Without realizing it, Ryūji had left his seat and walked quickly behind Aisaka and Kitamura who just left a while ago.

This doesn't feel right, but... After a few seconds of hesitation, *But...* Though he kept on having doubts, his feet still continued to move forward silently.

But, this is Aisaka's moment of truth! And it's not like I don't know how clumsy she is. Maybe she will trip, maybe she will fall down the stairs, maybe she will stutter at the crucial moment, or maybe she will even cry... Since Aisaka's clumsiness is simply spectacular, and only I know about that.

That's why, that's why I'm so worried... I have to keep an eye on her... so...

So...?

"...!"

The feet that were originally following those two stopped dead in their tracks on the staircase.

Ryūji asked himself again,

So, so what? Though I am worried about that clumsy idiot, what else can I do? Help her? But, what for? 'Let us pretend all this never happened, let us go back to where we were before the love letter!' That was what she said herself.

If that's the case, I have to erase everything about Aisaka that only I know about from the bottom of my heart. No, instead of thinking about these sad moments, I'd better consider my own current situation! If this clumsy girl fails in confessing her feelings to a guy, how am I supposed to help? Am I supposed to go to her and say 'You all right? I'll protect you!' I mean, how lame can that be? It's not even funny.

Ryūji fretted his brow and squinted his fierce eyes, as though a dangerous beam was being fired... though he wasn't mad. *I guess I'll head towards the entrance, but not because I want to block any annoying people from passing through, but...* Though no one would really understand, that was not the real reason.

Sigh--- He breathed deeply.

"... I guess I'll go home!"

He forcefully changed directions with his feet and walked away from the two that had left, back towards the classroom. Without anybody noticing, this person seemed to have grown a few centimeters in the past few days.

Noto and Haruta, whom Ryūji recently got acquainted with, had invited Ryūji to go somewhere with them, but he turned them down and returned to his desk. *Why am I feeling so restless? Why won't I hang out with my friends or go home? I really don't feel like going home now.* So instead Ryūji decided he would go kill time in a book store.

As he made preparations to go home, *Guess I'll head to the bathroom first!* And so he walked alone down the corridor...

After walking past someone who had just wiped his hands dry, Ryūji found himself alone in the bathroom, which was eerily quiet, an abnormally strong fragrance of the detergents could be smelt.

As he washed his hands in the basin, Ryūji stared at the face in the mirror - it was the same, boring face. Though that was nothing new to him, in fact, he was getting a bit tired of that, so... *Just as I thought...*

Ryūji's thoughts weren't directed at his face, what he was thinking was instead...

"... Her expression sure looked scary..."

Is that Palmtop Tiger doing her best right now?

For the whole day, whether during lessons or recess, Ryūji was constantly glancing at Aisaka's face. As the end of school approached, every second Aisaka's expression would change considerably. By the end of the last period a while ago, there was no longer any expression on her face - It was neither red nor green, but pale white.

Ryūji thought, *She's about to confess, so she ought to show a cute face. What a dense fellow.*

Speaking of dense, he now recalled that commotion this morning, when she wrought havoc upon the classroom, and even frowned at her best friend Minori. It was because it was Minori that she made such a serious expression.

That means, she did it for me... It was all done for Ryūji.

She did it so that his crush Minori would stop misunderstanding him. It was for this sole purpose that she had created such a ruckus.

When you think about it, Aisaka never did the same thing for herself, that is, end Kitamura's

misunderstanding of her - namely because Kitamura wasn't around when she went ballistic.

In other words, she did all this just for Ryūji, that was why she...

"...What a... what a..."

As he sighed, the words he wanted to say disappeared as well. *Thick, stupid, clumsy way to do it...* In the end, Ryūji couldn't say it.

Must she really resort to that kind of method for everything? There are probably other, more subtle ways to solve this. To use such a method where she has no gain whatsoever, she's really... gentle to the point of being pathetic. Ryūji genuinely believed that, *Aisaka's actually a really gentle girl.* Without realizing it, he had used such a laughable adjective to describe the Palmtop Tiger. But he couldn't help it, as it was true.

"Gentle..." Ryūji said softly. The one crying and lamenting about how she's no good at being gentle to people was actually the most gentle person of all. Those who never hung out with her would never know, but at least to Ryūji, this was definitely true.

"WHOA!"

A sudden yell caused Ryūji to turn his head in reflex.

A schoolmate who had just entered the bathroom simply stood still and yelled in horror. "What's wrong?" Asked the person behind him, before he too exclaimed, " Whoa! I, I'm sorry to disturb you!!!" They were both intimidated by the intense glare that Ryūji had suddenly shot at them. To other people, both Ryūji and the Palmtop Tiger were classified as dangerous - as usual.

They're probably gonna announce 'Takasu has occupied the bathroom, stay away from there, it's dangerous' or something like that. This would mean there won't be anyone coming in. Suits me just fine! Since he wasn't in the mood to see anybody, this was just fine for him.

Anyway, since nobody's gonna come in for some time, might as well ventilate this place! Ryūji thought, *Since the humidity's causing this reek* He began to walk towards the window to open it as his obsession for cleanliness got the better of him.

He unlocked the handle, pushed opened the window... and then he froze.

"Kitamura-kun! I, Kitamura-kun... Kitamura-kun... w... well... umm..."

... EHH!? Ryūji screamed at the bottom of his heart as he stood there petrified. He grabbed his head, *Was it an illusion?* No, it wasn't. This means...

He could hear Aisaka's voice very loudly and clearly.

This men's room was situated on the second floor, below it was the visitor bathroom, and right outside that was the school garden - A space sandwiched between the bathroom window and the row of trees ahead. Feeling incredulous, he slowly stuck his head out to peek, hoping he had heard wrong. Sadly, even that glimmer of hope was dashed.

Aisaka and Kitamura were standing right there in that ambiguous spot. *Any person with the slightest bit of intelligence would know that whoever uses the bathroom would be able to hear what's being said there!*

"Seriously... why does she... have to pick right outside the bathroom..."

... You idiot!

Ryūji grabbed his head and moaned, and then squatted under the window. *Even though no one passes through there - the reason for that is because it sometimes stinks.*

Without touching the ground with his backside, Ryūji was close to suffocating as he squatted with his head between his knees just like that under the opened window. *Aisaka, you really are an idiot! More importantly, what's gonna happen if someone like me were to enter and open the window? Wouldn't they be completely seen?!*

I don't believe this... So Ryūji decided to stay here for a while. *If anyone comes in, I'll just glare at them with these fierce eyes.* That was what he planned.

No matter what, I'd better close the window. I wouldn't want to eavesdrop on them. Just as Ryūji was about to stand up...

"Hold it a second!"

Hearing Kitamura's voice, he remained still.

"I think I know what you want to say, but I'd look like an idiot if I guessed wrongly, so before I hear you out, I'd like to make sure of something... OK, here goes, are you going out with Takasu?"

His heart skipped a beat. *I can't stand and eavesdrop... or rather, squat and eavesdrop.* Although that was what he told himself, when he heard his own name, he couldn't help but listen. *This is bad, I gotta close the window, or get out of here at once...*

"T, Takasu-kun..."

Even though that's what he had in mind...

But he couldn't move. Ryūji seemed to have been tied down by Aisaka's high-pitched nervous voice.

"Takasu-kun is, he's... he's, he's... he's..."

There were no words coming out after she repeatedly uttered the word "he's" many times.

Idiot! What are you doing?! What're you waiting for?! Hurry up and confess! Or what are you standing outside the bathroom for?! Ryūji screamed inside, while squatting there silently. But Aisaka just couldn't continue.

Under such intense silence, she couldn't even utter the word "he's" anymore. *At this stage, a normal guy would usually freak out by such intensity and say something like "If that is all, I guess I'll be leaving!" And Kitamura... well, he's busier than your average guy. So if he leaves now, he'll never know about Aisaka's feelings.*

Hurry up and say it! You have to! Ryūji clenched his fists tightly and gritted his teeth, he even forgot to breathe, and yet Aisaka remained silent. It seemed like this silence would go on and on.

Could it have been Mission Impossible since the beginning? She couldn't even call out to him in the classroom normally and now she wants to confess?! That's just too reckless! Is this the end? Ryūji closed his eyes in resignation.

It was at that moment...

"My relationship with Takasu-kun was all a misunderstanding by Minorin! T, the person I really like is..."

There came a breeze.

"... Kitamura-kun!"

Ahhh!!!

Ryūji's legs lost their strength and he nearly ended up falling on his backside. He quickly held onto the wall.

Holding his breath and trying not to make any noise, he kept his mouth shut. Eventually, he even covered his mouth with his hands while exclaiming repeatedly in his heart, *Way to go, girl!*

Even though she couldn't even start a conversation with him, even though she was very nervous, Aisaka still managed to confess her feelings to Kitamura. I probably couldn't do the same; if right now I had to go and confess to Minori like how she did it, I don't think I could do it. Although I keep pushing Aisaka to do her best, if I really had to go and confess like she did... I couldn't do it. There's no way I could be as direct as her .

As the word "like" was uttered, Ryūji the outsider felt like he had been shot by a shining arrow filled with determination and pureness. The arrow carrying Aisaka's feelings no doubt had been fired into Kitamura's heart as well and into his body.

Yes, that's good. With this, feelings will go to where they should belong, and delivered to where they should go.

So this sense of dejection must just be my imagination.

"You like me...? The thing with Takasu was all a misunderstanding? Did Kushieda get it wrong? She misunderstood you and Takasu?"

"... Y, yes. I told her, but Minorin just wouldn't believe me..."

Kitamura thought for a while and remained still, in the end he finally understood and said,

"I see. Then I'm really sorry that I got it wrong. This is because Kushieda can be quite assertive with her thoughts... Yeah, I think I understand now."

"Umm..."

Kitamura's voice was as calm as usual.

Aisaka's was as ambiguous as usual.

Ryūji sighed with his hands over his mouth to prevent any sound from coming out.

The silence quietly filled the men's bathroom, as he squatted and tried his best not to make a sound, Ryūji felt the silence vibrate around him.

Ryūji wanted to get rid of his incessant breathing and stand up, so he could close the window and go home...

"B, b, but! But!"

At that moment.

Aisaka's voice outside the window once again spoke loudly.

"But, I definitely don't hate Takasu-kun at all! Absolutely not! When I was with him, I didn't feel like my breathing had stopped! I always thought I would suffocate every time... but Takasu-kun... Ryūji would even prepare some tasty fried rice for me! Whenever I needed someone to be by my side, only Ryūji was there!

He encouraged me even when it meant he had to lie! It's always been like this, that's... what I think! Even now! It feels painful, as though I'm being torn apart, me and Ryūji... no matter when... even now! Because Ryūji was at my side! It's because he was with me that I'm able to be here...!"

Ryūji instantly froze.

What are you doing?! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!

At that moment, Aisaka was proclaiming loudly to the point of tears,

"I definitely don't hate him. To me, Ryūji... he..."

This sounds completely like a... a...

"Is that so?"

Kitamura's voiced sounded cheerful.

"It's alright, I think I understand Aisaka's feelings. Anyway... you and Takasu really do get along quite well. Seeing you say that, I feel relieved."

"R, relieved...?"

"Yeah, and do you remember? It was exactly at this time last year that I confessed to you. I remember saying how I was smitten by your beauty and your directness in expressing your anger, I think."

Ryūji was so shocked by this revelation, which he had just heard for the first time, that he came close to tears. Aisaka remained quiet. The only one whose legs were trembling from all the shock was Ryūji, the only one who didn't know anything was Ryūji.

"Though I was rejected in the next second."

"... Yes, I remember! How could I... forget? It was a strange confession, only Kitamura-kun could have pulled it off. From that point on, every time when you came to our class to find Minorin to discuss club matters, I would always think, 'Ah... that was you...' I remember everything!"

"So you do remember! Since you never seemed to notice my existence, I had thought you had forgotten already! I confessed to you back then because I thought you were really beautiful, but when you started to hang out with Takasu, you looked even more captivating...

because you would always have such very interesting expressions."

"I, interesting expressions? Me?"

"Yup, whenever you were with Takasu, you'd always make some really interesting faces, so I was relieved. Takasu really is a nice guy! And for him to be able to understand a girl like you, I really think that he's amazing."

Kitamura seemed to be smiling cheerfully. And then...

"W, w... WHAT DID I JUST SAY?!"

Realizing her blunder, Aisaka screamed.

"W, wait a minute... What was I saying? ... And Kitamura-kun, what are you saying?! I already said there's nothing between me and Ryūji, that... eh?! My face looks interesting?! No... Ehh?! No, wait! Wait! Did I just confess?! Did I really just confess?! But... no way! Ehhh?!"

"Oh no, how did it come to this?" The Palmtop Tiger kept on repeating as though she had lost her bearings. If it were anyone besides Kitamura, they probably wouldn't know how to handle this,

"Aisaka, it's all right."

"A, a, a, a, all right?! What do you mean all right?! I don't even know what on earth I just said! How can this be all right?!"

"I'm very grateful for your feelings, and I'm really happy. I'm sure we'll become good friends from now on."

"... F, friends...?"

Aisaka was so shaken that she became lost for words.

"Yes, good friends."

Good friends.

This wasn't exactly the relationship Aisaka was looking for. So Aisaka should respond by saying 'That's not it!' She has to. .. Ryūji thought.

She was supposed to, but,

"... Friends... Me and... Kitamura-kun...?"

She was expected to say it, but,

Aisaka never said it, she never said *I like you, but I don't want to be your good friend, I want to be your girlfriend*. In the end, Aisaka's whispers became harder to hear...

I rejected you after you confessed to me before, but while watching you afterwards, I grew to like you myself. Now I really do like you, and I would like us to go out together as a couple.

... She never properly repeated the most important part of it all.

The supposedly ultra self-centered Palmtop Tiger was now trapped by her own claws. "Umm," she uttered, backed down and was finished.

"Well then, I'll see you tomorrow!"

Kitamura said in his usual carefree style. The good news: his attitude was still the same as usual; the bad news: he had completely no idea what just happened.

Aisaka also picked herself up, calmed her frantic mind, and reverted to her deadpan style,

"See you tomorrow."

Ryūji lowered his head in dejection. He scratched his head and closed his eyes. From the sound of the footsteps , he could tell that the two of them had walked off in opposite directions. All that he could do was moan,

"... Such a dense girl..."

... Kitamura never really got your message, dammit!

That directness of yours that Kitamura talks about, how much of it does he actually know? Your tears, laughter, timidness, loneliness, your love for him... how many of these fragile feelings have you kept hidden?

No matter how painful or gentle these feelings are, you never really let him understand them! You never really let him understand you!

Getting up on his stiff, cold legs, Ryūji slowly walked out.

"Goodbye." *Aisaka looked really calm when she said that, though she must have hidden some feelings which no one could understand when she left in solitude.*

She must be crying in a voice no one can hear while walking with her back towards Kitamura, her tears must be falling down as she walked quaveringly without anyone seeing her... It has to be!

If that's the case - since only I know about this...

Question... What should Takasu Ryūji do now?

Answer... "Simple, really."

Though he said it with confidence, even he wasn't so sure. He wasn't answering with his head, but with his heart, skin, bones and flesh, with this body that had spent a lot of time together with Aisaka.

Let it move on its own then! If things don't go wrong, then this body will take me to where she is.

Definitely!

* * *

On the path towards home, under the rays of the usual sunset...

"... What do you want?"

Ryūji finally caught up with Aisaka and grabbed her on the shoulder... They were in a quiet residential alleyway with no one else in sight.

Aisaka turned and gave a puzzled expression, she then looked at Ryūji, who was still trying to catch his breath, and said,

"Stop it already... You're no longer my dog, there's no need to follow me anymore!"

She stated coldly, pushing Ryūji's hand off as she continued to walk forward. Ryūji spoke towards her back,

"Saying that even though you feel like crying. You're feeling depressed because your confession failed, right? Though his response was not quite exactly a rejection."

"...!"

After leaping backwards quite a distance, Aisaka exclaimed,

"Y, you... saw?!"

"... Let me put this straight, I didn't mean to eavesdrop on you. It's your fault really, how can you be so stupid as to do your confession just outside the window of the men's room of all places? I just happened to hear the whole thing while going to the bathroom."

Under the rays of the sunset, Ryūji could still make out that Aisaka's face was becoming very red as she muttered, "R, really?!" *Looks like she really didn't think that out.*

"Well, what now? Shall we go buy ingredients for dinner tonight? Or do you want to go to last night's family restaurant to commemorate your failed confession ? I can listen to you moan about it all night, and it's my treat, but just for today though!"

"... W... What, are you talking about?!"

Aisaka stood motionless while facing Ryūji, her eyes widened as though she had just seen something incredible.

"Come to think of it, there's a sale on pork meat today!"

"What pork meat?!"

"Or do you want to have beef tonight?"

"Not beef either! That's got nothing to do with it, none of it! ... What's wrong with you?! Why?! You're no longer. .."

"Or do you want to cook yourself?"

"Enough! ... I said... enough! Stop it already! It's all..."

"I'll be by your side."

Aisaka was left speechless by that clear declaration, and fretted her brow painfully. Ryūji looked straight into Aisaka's eyes and continued to elaborate,

"I'll be by your side, I'll cook for you, you can come to my place to eat as usual, and I'll make bentos for you as well as picking you up every morning, so..."

"So what?! ... What the hell are you doing?!"

Aisaka yelled, her voice echoing across the alleyway,

"What on earth are you talking about?! We'll get misunderstood again! Minorin still doesn't believe us, you'll make her misunderstand you all over again, is that alright with you?"

"Yeah."

The answer came out easier than expected,

"When that happens, then it'll be my turn to go ballistic! I'll make sure Kitamura's in the classroom and turn the classroom into a war zone just so he won't misunderstand you again."

"W... why..."

The tears began to trickle down her cheeks. *See?* Ryūji thought to himself, *Aisaka is that sort of person, she would go to a place where no one could see her - except for me - and cry alone.*

"Why, why... Why would you do such a thing?! Didn't I already say you're no longer my dog?! You don't have to do this anymore!"

"... I don't know either, but I just feel like doing it... Since you're crying, I can't leave you alone like that. Because I'll get worried, worried whether you're getting hungry... At least that's what my gentle side thinks."

"W... what the hell?!"

Despite her watery eyes, Aisaka still stared at Ryūji fiercely,

"Nobody's asking you to do this! I'm not a kid, so leave me alone! I don't need you worrying about me!"

Ryūji next said,

"... Ahh, so that's why!"

He finally understood.

Why he wanted to be by her side so much.

Why he was so worried about her, and why he couldn't leave her alone. This was all because...

"It's because I'm not a dog... that's why I'll stay by your side."

"... What?!"

"Actually, dogs can't really stay by your side!"

That was all.

I'm no dog, a dog could never do that.

A dog would come over if it was called, but a tiger would never call out to anyone. Since they never need anybody's help, that's why they're tigers... that's the sort of beast a tiger is.

And right here, right now, I am not a dog.

Even I feel like laughing at what I'm about to say, so go ahead and laugh! Despite this, Ryūji decided to go on, because at that moment he wanted to say it no matter what, he wanted to let Aisaka know...

"I'm a dragon, and you're a tiger... Since ancient times, the dragon has been the only beast that could stand equal to the tiger. That's why I have to become a dragon, so I can stay by your side."

In order to stand equally with the Palmtop Tiger, Takasu Ryūji had to become a dragon. He had decided to do this, even if it meant getting laughed at, even if it meant being treated like a fool... but,

"... Ai... saka...?"

He wasn't called an idiot and he wasn't laughed at either.

Standing before him was a girl who couldn't make any sound. She stood with her feet wide apart, her cheeks were soaked wet by tears as she raised her head to look at Ryūji.

She looked very angry, and very sad at the same time; she looked a bit fearful, yet also a bit troubled, as well as a bit surprised.

Her tiny body was filled with emotion, ready to explode at any moment. As she clenched her fists tightly. ..

"... Taiga..."

At the mention of her name, her body shook as though she was being struck... Aisaka Taiga's eyelids twitched.

"This is part of being equal, right? ... Since you call me Ryūji, then I'll call you Taiga."

Is that fine? Just as he had finished...

"... What are you trying to pull?!"

A shadow stretched from her legs, it felt as though it had suddenly expanded. *Maybe I've seen wrongly, but...*

"What is this conceited nonsense about? Why should I let you call me by my first name?! ... What the hell is this nonsense about being equal?! How shameful! Be aware of where you stand, you idiot Ryūji!"

"Eh..."

The bomb had exploded. *Ah, that's right...*

"You probably have no idea what you're talking about! If you really did, how could you have said such insolent stuff? Besides, what the hell is this?! Ahh, I see now, could it be that you..."

After releasing a torrent of abuses, Aisaka suddenly stopped. Just like that, she was the scariest thing imaginable standing there just like that. Her eyes glared venomously towards her opponent while she glided and approached him from below, emitting an aura that would intimidate anyone into paralysis.

Those were the true colors of the Palmtop Tiger.

"... Don't tell me you've fallen in love with me!"

"... Don't be rid..."

"Hmph, I didn't think so! How could you of all people have the nerve to do something so suicidal?"

"... Ugh... ah..."

Aisaka smiled while staring at Ryūji - though Ryūji didn't dare look at her eyes, he still did his best to respond,

"Well, of course not!"

Yeah that's right. That is so very right. If she had meant my feelings towards Minori, then my feeling towards Aisaka were different, yes they were.

But there was one thing that was sure, Ryūji really wanted to take care of that Palmtop Tiger known as Taiga. *Even if it has nothing to do with love, I just wanted to be by her side... I must be by her side, that's the sort of person I want to be. That's all. That's all, okay!? There's nothing wrong with that, right?!*

"... Oh shoot, we need to move! To the supermarket, to buy some pork!"

Without hesitating, Ryūji raised his spirits and took off in great strides.

Daily life must go on as usual! There's still plenty of time, so let's stop here for now! Now that things have progressed this far, there's no point in thinking complicated thoughts. Our priority for now is dinner!

"If we can get some good pork for today, then we can make a hotpot! Ah, perhaps a simple barbecue pork would do as well... And why're you not following?!"

Noticing Taiga wasn't following, Ryūji was forced to do a steep U-turn while still walking in big strides and hurried back to her side. "Hurry up already!" He urged, though he didn't grab her by the hand, instead simply poking her elbow with the corner of his bag.

"Ryūji...I want to have a yogurt sundae."

"Huh?! What the hell, in the end you still wanted to go to a family restaurant? And I was so looking forward to preparing food tonight..."

"We can have pork afterwards... we can have pork with ginger... no, we should have braised pork, the soft and juicy ones!"

"Huh? Well, I'm fine with braised pork, but can you eat all of that? It's already five now, dinner in my house always starts at six since time immemorial... Hey, stop ignoring me! And why're you walking ahead of me?!"

"... Ryūji!"

Taiga, who had walked in front of Ryūji on her own, stopped suddenly and turned around, staring at Ryūji with her transparent eyes. "Ugh!" Ryūji found himself lost for words,

"... What? T... Taiga?!"

He answered frantically while quickly moving his gaze towards the evening sky. But...

"... Can you shut up for a bit?"

As the mean words entered Ryūji's ears, he wondered if he had heard wrong. "Ahhh~!" Taiga purposely sighed in front of Ryūji and said,

"You should realize how depressed I am right now! How can you not be worried? I'm counting on you for our strategy next time, I still haven't given up on

Kitamura-kun, you know? And you, what was that you said? A dragon? Ah well, it doesn't make any difference whether you're a dragon or a dog, but since you said you'll be by my side, then you should work very hard towards my happiness!"

Where did those tears just now disappear to? The Palmtop Tiger was still the Palmtop Tiger and with just a few cruel words coupled with contemptuous eyes, Ryūji's heart was dealt a heavy blow.

Just how sharp were those claws and fangs? How far will this ferocious, man-eating, Palmtop Tiger be left unopposed?

And, what will become of him now that he has declared that he'll stay by her side?

"Maybe.....I was a little too hasty..."

Groaning on reflex, Ryūji stopped dead in his tracks. This might have been a mistake. Thinking so, he firmly shut both his eyes.

That's why, he couldn't see it.

He couldn't see the appearance of Taiga, slightly away from him, smiling with her face down, as she watched Ryūji.

"... He said, 'Taiga'..."

He couldn't see the expression on her face as her stifled, ticklish laughter turned into the chuckling of a dove.

Today, it still has not been seen by anyone in the world.

Author's Notes

This is Take Yuyu, whose weight is ever increasing. Whenever I lower my head to look at my foreboding body, I always wonder "This isn't a stomach anymore, it's a floating ring!" This realization updates itself everyday. Though floating rings might actually represent hope, or a dream, or even happiness? Well, if that's the case... it might be a good thing for the stomach to get bigger then! If you don't agree with me, then I'll show no mercy! (Says that as she eyes the bag of instant noodles nearby.)

Anyway, has everyone finished reading *Toradora!* Volume 1 now? I would like to thank each reader for purchasing this book, and I'm glad if you actually like it.

Q: Why aren't there any battle scenes, portrayals of the characters' inner world, or characters getting "fired up"?

A: That's just how I chose to design the story.

... The world of *Toradora!* is slice of life. A very normal romantic story, with a bit of comedy. I intend to write these sort of stories from now on, so if you like it, please continue to support *Toradora!*

By the way, I would like to thank readers of my other novel *Watashitachi no Tamura-kun* for sending me letters. Thanks a lot! Your thoughts have all been read in their entirety. I treat every letter seriously to the point of wanting to hug them while sleeping. To thank these voices of support, I'll work hard on coming up with new developments for the *Tamura-kun* series.

Anyway, I guess this book will to arrive in everyone's hands by March (2006)... (Though I say guess, it's more like expected...) Though it's January 3rd now as I write this Author's Note, so I might as well wish everyone a Happy New Year! Under the pressure of making resolutions, I made the following declaration: I have only one goal for this year, that is to work harder.

The reason I made such a goal was because of something my editor unintentionally said,

"... Takemiya-san, just what do you normally do?"

He probably has forgotten about it, but I really freaked out when I heard a question like that. What do I normally do? I'm a professional writer... I don't normally work...

As I ponder carefully as to why he would ask such a question, I finally figured out the true meaning of what my editor was trying to say:

"(As an up-and-coming writer as well as being a professional, you only come out with two volumes every year. Though there are now more chapters in the books, it doesn't really feel like you've been working...) Takemiya-san, (as someone who should be working) just what do you normally (besides work) do? (By the way, aren't you getting fat lately?)"

As I come back to my senses...

What do I normally do? I am indeed working! Though I spend more time eating snacks, cooking spaghetti, adding warm milk, mixing the spaghetti with cod, steaming potatoes, sprinkling nori on the cod spaghetti, cooking ham, and adding some natto on the cod spaghetti... things like that... to be more precise... Aren't I eating too much cod lately?

That's right, I must stop making cod spaghetti and get responsibly back to work! Now isn't the time to eat cod

spaghetti twice (200g each as well) a day! So for the sake of this floating ring...! It'll be nice if I can get rid of this slab of meat...!

That's why this year I must work hard, as well as keep my intake of cod spaghetti to a minimum. In order for readers to enjoy my work, I have to concentrate with all my might no matter what, and work hard even if it means breaking my keyboard.

Next, my New Year's wish is "To naturally grow thin as I work hard"! As well as hoping that when visiting the editor, I don't repeat the tragedy of hurting my back while sitting on the soft sofa, resulting in me having to sit somewhere else...

Finally, thank you for reading this far. As with my other novel, Yasu-sensei is again in charge of illustrating this novel. To Yasu-sensei and the editors, I look forward to working further with you. See you in the next volume of *Toradora!* Alright, it's time for me to go and pick up those keyboard keys which I accidentally smashed while typing too hard.

Yuyuko Takemiya